A Poet in Center City

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Cover image by Mary Evelyn Harju
Portrait of Adam Fieled, 2007
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Preface

What A Poet in Center City focuses on most intensely is the complex interrelationship between the four founding fathers of the Philly Free School— myself, Mike Land (John Rind), Nick Gruberg (Ricky Flint), and Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum (Christopher Severin). It was easily the most explosive group context I've ever been part of— everywhere we went, we attracted attention. Part of the explosive energy was generated by our physical appearance together— I was the shortest, at 5'9/5'10, and we were all good looking, with dark hair and eyes. We looked like brothers. None of us particularly lacked education; Nick and I were already in graduate school; but we all drank, drugged, smoked, and shagged nonetheless. When we hit the streets, the Philly Free School guys did massive divide and conquer routines just by ambling into rooms (particularly bars, music venues, and art galleries). The streets of Center City Philadelphia had clearly never seen anything quite like us. Because the four-person square was split down the middle between bisexuals and hard-line heteros, we could as easily end up at Woody's as at Dirty Frank's.

But four explosive, abrasive personalities thrown into a cage together (no matter how glamorous the cage looks from the outside) is not easy to sustain; and, for us, the fractiousness was right there on the surface with the passionate élan. The "classic" period of the Philly Free School, with all four of us more or less completely engaged, lasted roughly a year, from mid 2004 to mid 2005; it wasn't exactly a Rimbaudian season in hell, nor was it an effortless joyride. It was a tumultuous congeries of both; was, in fact, the single most tumultuous year of my life. One of the big, cocaine-level highs for me was that I had (as I thought might be possible when I arrived in Philly in '99) created and let loose a wild beast into the Philly arts scene. There was something about the shows we put on at the Highwire Gallery that was feral— because we went out of our way to get everyone stoned and drunk, the nights there became bacchanals, with nothing timid, precious, or academic about them. The vibe was near-complete Dionysian abandon— well past the arid frigidity of Warhol's Factory, or the rich kid pomposity of the Cedar Bar.

There is, to my knowledge, no real parallel to the Philly Free School shows anywhere in the history of American art— not just for the bacchanalian frenzy, but for our wild, egalitarian sense of multi-media. The Philly Free School shows at the Highwire Gallery featured poetry (bare or with accompanying videos/images), paintings, bands, films, and even DJs. The shows were successful; people came. Even as the lurching four-headed beast ripped holes, willy-nilly, in everything and everyone it touched. There was always a violent undercurrent following us around. What we were together wore us down individually, as well. The lurching beast was not especially discriminating— it would not stick at tearing into its own flesh. We all wound up with blood on our hands— through sexual conquests and competitiveness, unrequited love, deep-in-our-cups harangues in many directions, and especially, gossip, gossip, and more gossip. America stood on the edge of a major recession— the times were not particularly generous. I still believe that the spirit of those Free School shows at the Highwire Gallery is worth preserving— rare visions of reckless American freedom, but executed with thoughtful taste. That's another reason why this book is worth reading, and why I wrote it.

#1

The story of my life in Center City begins on a hot August night outside Philly Java, on Fourth Street between South and Lombard. I had just re-met a poet named Christopher Severin. He was tall, a bit stocky, with a black bowl cut and a cherubic face. His cadence was distinctive— pressured, ironic, flippant on the surface. I had first met Christopher in Manayunk, on a semester break from Penn State a few years before. The circle he moved in, and led, was about poetry first, and what was then called 'd' magazine. The one night of the initial meeting, towards the end of '97, Christopher was quiet. Yet he was ensconced in a social world that was about movement, change, and vitality— master class Bohemianism. I later learned, and was stunned to assimilate, that he had associates in Cheltenham and knew all about me. He knew about my class-confounding troublemaking with Jena in State College, about my stature as both the James Dean of my high school class and (for junior and senior year) a first-tier driver, with a red Jetta at my disposal. I related to him that night, as someone more experienced than me at poetry, as a gestalt context. He had po-jargonese at his disposal which I was soon to acquire but didn't have yet, had done workshops and completed his BA. When he wrote to *dig in* to specific poems, it was studied beyond posturing, and hip to the Modernists as I was hip to modern philosophy but not Pound, yet (who had, as we well knew, grown up in Cheltenham too). So the hot August night was buttressed, consolidated, by a cold November night which preceded it, even if I had received a rejection slip from 'd'. We were sitting at a table outside, overhung with foliage from trees, overlooking TLA video store across the street. Suddenly we were overrun with teenagers— street kids, who never knew much but concrete and pavement. Amoreena, the angel, was offered up, in all her raven-headed ingenuousness, to tell Christopher the secret she wanted him to know. As they hovered around us (Christopher having known some of them before), I had a revelation of the wild vitality of Center City Philly. There were modes of being hidden here, from Amoreena's lean-in moves on out, which I had never experienced before. The suburbs had been slow and moderate; the college town I had known even more so; New York had been so brutish I registered very little at all. Center City was overwhelming in the right way— I had frissons from people and places, all in motion, going someplace. As I walked the long way back to 21st and Race, a magical moment had coalesced, and I knew that I had stepped like an actor into a role I could play— an avatar of channeling, directing, and reconfiguring the streets themselves. The stage was set.

#2

Fast forward into the spring— it's a chilly night in March. I'm sitting on a Septa train to Manayunk with Bill Rosenblum and Pete Lawson, two musicians. As always, Septa trains are a nightmare if you are, or happen to be, stoned. The no-bathroom scenario means you are forced to ride your buzz in a manner suited to suffering and general discomfort. Yet, as Center City develops for me, I learn the rigors of seeing what I can do when stoned. So, as uncomfortable as I am, I am also pushing at the bounds of what I can accomplish in the world as a guerilla-style Bohemian, a fighting flake. The weed we consumed at Bill's apartment was Benzedrine-y. Christopher Severin, otherwise occupied on this night, is letting me run an open-mike night at a coffee-joint called La Tazza on Cotton Street. Bill, Pete and I are investigating the night's buzz, digging in to the ambience, looking for apertures (of consciousness, of emotion) to fit into. I've brought a carton of eggs to break on my chest, as though our act was Iggy and the Stooges. But I wimp out, made fuzzy by E weed— I give the eggs to one of the attendees, once we're ensconced in La Tazza's red-painted basement, which has surprisingly high ceilings, making it an interesting place to read. Bill is short and stout, wears glasses and semi-rags— his day gig isn't much. Having grown up and gone to college in West Chester, and forced to stay in West Chester until his mid-twenties, Bill has a permanent sense of in-built gratitude to be in Philly. The city was always to be his Manifest Destiny— doing an office gig while holding down keyboards for a prominent local band (while also working out studio wonk chops on Pro Tools) is not just what he wants, it's levitational for him. Bill's a talker and high-spirited and thus fun to get high with, whether he wants to discuss (a catholic-minded dude) the 13th Floor Elevators, the novels of Philip K. Dick, or whether the PA system at Doc Watson's has gone permanently haywire. Pete's a lanky redhead with a bushy red beard— how he maintains himself is a mystery. Sort of. Pete spent his childhood, he says, in Chicago, and the confluence of circumstances which brough him to Philly is mysterious. Pete makes up for lacking Bill's solidity by being an able leader-among-men kind of guy. He'll direct action easily, set guidelines and strictures in place, draw up contracts, and his own gig at Office Cents on Chestnut Street gives him leeway to keep the store chop-chop there. Pete's paintings are a graceful semi-rip on Abstract Expressionism, and he follows New York art closely, without having any concrete plans in that direction. The darkness of a kind of sadism is there— me and Bill have both watched Pete behave abusively by this time— but Pete and Bill and I are all bonded by a fierce determination to have a good time, no matter what, held-in piss (and held-in spiteful loathing of Septa) be damned. They're in the game, as I am, to get high and have fun. At twenty-four, and in a state of constant excitement about what might happen in Philly, it's enough for me to get attached to them, particularly Bill, because a studio wonk friend is important to cultivate, for music and books. I need man-power and they (Pete less so) need guidance. Christopher is a figurehead in his own right, centered here on Main Street, but his scene is master class but limited. The world converging around me is dynamic, shot through with people who mean it, but I'm obliged to shape it myself.

#3

There is the problem of mixing worlds and that nobody in Philly does it. Things remain segregated, and to the extent that Philly artists don't mix, the Center City art scene is all dark corners. What happens if you match Christopher with Bill and Pete? Actually, Bill and Christopher, both being well-spoken, well-read, and intellectually astute, mix reasonably well, even as Pete and Christopher don't know what to make of each other. But I'm not worried yet. The energy haunting our shindigs has a golden promise built into it which never seems to fail. One of my compartments is filled by the Center City Goth scene. The pretense of kids who espouse Goth is that the world, being a dark and fearful place, is best confronted and assimilated by fronting, or front-loading, what might seem foreboding. Dressed as an army in black, the girls adorned with black eye-liner, dark lipstick, festooned also with as many body piercings as the human frame will allow, Goth kids lay down a gauntlet of how many ways spookiness can affect a catharsis for those prone to the right kind of pity and terror. Goth ladies of the night may or may not have promiscuous habits, but will never bore you with the crappiness of the mundane— who's making what kind of money, for example, or who's angling for what promotion, or who married or bought what house. The backbone of Goth is transcendentalism above the mundane, into the realm of gods, goddesses, archetypes, and occult and/or fantastic acknowledgements. I meet the niche stalwarts— Lee and Damon Buckner, and Larsen Spurn. Lee and Damon are tall, black, mystical Christians and musicians. Lee is dominant, and always followed by a retinue of Goth kids— Center City raised, precociously sex-and-drugs oriented, attired in black leather pants, fishnet shirts, and chains. Their domain is a series of nightclubs— some, like Evolution, on Delaware Avenue near Penn's Landing, others in South Philly. Lee plays a twelve-string acoustic guitar, and his songs are intense, chromatic-leaning meditations on fairytale worlds— ghosts, goblins, vampires, demons. Prince to Syd Barrett to Ozzy Osbourne. Damon is calmer, more generous and hospitable, often with Lee to lend moral support. Larsen is their rival— a white, Europe-raised transplant with grandiose plans, whose front-man moves borrow heavily from the 80s New Romantics, and whose looks form an unholy shtup between Robert Smith and Simon Le Bon. He sings in a band called Station, and is considered eye candy for the Goth ladies. The night I meet him at the Khyber signifies— the whole Center City Goth crew are there, and I give Larsen my multi-media sales pitch. Again, the feeling manifests— something above our heads is pushing pieces into place, generating a kind of self-reinforcing momentum engendering social structures which stand on their own, without conniving hustles or undue stress. We're all young and moving fast— the vibe is right, and the dope. Larsen, at this point, is always holding, and no social jaunt would be complete without a toast-over-a-spliff. Still, I have to get used to the rough edges these characters live with— no health insurance, bills which can't be paid: scattershot approaches to leading a solid life. Nights I spend at Larsen's at 13th and Ellsworth are a case in point. An invisible shield is protecting all of us. Still, I consolidate the rough streak I acquired in NYC.

#4

I have it in my mind to start doing things at coffeehouses, so I do. What Christopher and I do at Philly Java isn't particularly intense— we sit in the cozy, brick-walled back room, reading our poems. When we get lucky, the Amoreena teenybopper gang grace us with their presence, or Lee and Damon. If other poets show up, so much the better. One thing I notice about Christopher is that he has a knack for graphic design. The fliers he designs for these open readings are all done at the architect's office where he works at on Main Street in Manayunk, and have a nouveau Dada feel, and the images are memorable. The Last Drop, also, is available, and I arrange a show there for Lee and Bill and Pete. Noteworthy about the Last Drop on 13th and Pine: more even than Philly Java, it's a waystation for young, hip, creative types in Center City, especially DJs and indie rock folk. With its black, coffered, high ceilings, and Christmas-y, green and red interior, the Last Drop reeks of a Philadelphian version of Paris, or wherever else in Europe the architecture is elegant and expansive. Not to mention that what gets spun at the Drop is always big news: indie classics like the Kinks and Big Star, Western seaboard feminist agit-prop like Le Tigre, and electronic club mixes debuted to break in afternoon coffees and cappuccinos (rather than coke and E) as well. One thing I've already let go of is the need to be the main attraction. If you want to put a scene together, you have to know how to juggle egos; to hold a hollow emptiness in your consciousness for others to enter and establish themselves. Bill likes to work with a poetess named Dara March, who is several years younger than him but is another West Chester hold-out. He plays keyboards while she recites. I had known Dara as a poetry editor in the 90s, and a detested rival of Christopher Severin. Predictably, Christopher remains unexcited that Dara has now been asked, through Bill, to participate, even as there's nothing in the situation this time to make Dara look more powerful than us. I've invented a moniker for the series I'm putting together— This Charming Lab. Thank you Morrissey, thank you Beckenham Arts Lab. The night of the show, the Drop overflows with Lee's minions. They are not shy about referring to their bowls for further refreshment. The proprietor of the Drop is fuming (for this and other reasons) but the show goes on. And I've got my girl Joan there, she's Goth, a teenager who still lives with her parents (and pet sea-monkeys) in Germantown, and Larsen and Lee hate each other so Larsen is missing, and the thronged downstairs, green smoke fuzzing the room, is about heaven, and what I want forever.

#5

One thing I do with Bill Rosenblum is patrol Olde City and other neighborhoods, looking for venues. We're usually stoned when we do this; Bill teaches me the nooks and crannies around Center City where you can get stoned in the street. I'm in love with the Center City streets at night; they have an odd kind of peacefulness (especially when held up against the grisliness of NYC). How City Hall looks walking west on Market at midnight; a solid, baroque mass of brick, white marble and limestone. It has a way of imposing, interrogating whether there is anything in your brain to match it, brick by brick, limestone by limestone. Did you know your brain could be a building? Or how the Liberty Place Towers look from Arch or Race Street, near the Trocadero— a dare, a gambit to see what you can withstand about the sublimity built into the human brain and its constructs. The sublime, Schopenhauer teaches us, can attract or repulse, but invariably frightens. In Philadelphia, the buildings always have a way of scaring us into obeisance, and admiration. Dope takes the buildings and marshmallows them. Bill and I are moseying, one night, down Second Street in Olde City between Market and Arch, and stumble across a joint called the Upside Down Café. It's run by an attractive African-American woman with a Jamaican accent: Mimi. Mimi wears clinging dresses which expose her extreme thinness, and her physiology is tolerant, if uninterested. She doesn't need to know about Pound, or Philip K. Dick. She clearly thinks we're both on the cute side of things. She's accommodating and gives us the run of the place, to do events as we choose. Now, This Charming Lab has at least a sort-of home, in an el primo location, on a block second-tier for First Fridays but by no means unused or derelict. The events we put on at the Upside Down don't change much— we are "newbies," not plugged into any hot circuits yet, and don't have much draw. But we're doing multi-media, literature and music together (writers and bands) in Center City Philly, and I thought (perhaps) I could investigate trying to get This Charming Lab some press. Fodder for all of us, City Paper and Philly Weekly did for Center City what the Village Voice did for Manhattan— presented us with a cultural reality declared to be crest-of-the-wave. I was skeptical, even then, especially as books are stalagmites about crest-of-the-wave action when it's short term. But Renaissance men of daring, like Bill and myself, could stomach both crests of both waves— the baby short-term ones and the more stalwart eternity ones. So, we lived on a daily diet of both serious stuff and the jejune free-press weeklies. I was to learn that the press is its own dark corner, not animated by too many specks of light, but specks to be cherished when and if you find them.

#6

Olde City is famous around Philly and the East Coast for its "First Fridays." On the first Friday of every month, all the Olde City art galleries opened their doors and offered new shows, wine and cheese. As of the turn of the century, Philly has produced little to compete with the hoopla of New York's century XX art scene. Philly visual art has a reputation for being staid, formalist. I will later learn that Philly formalism in painting begins with PAFA (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) and its mascot Andrew Wyeth. But the set-up is cozy and sensuous and it seemed logical at the time that on First Fridays This Charming Lab would set up shop at the Upside Down, which was advantageously placed, with its glass panel façade, to attract street traffic. Bill and Dara do spoken-word with keyboards, I read and play a few numbers on my acoustic, Christopher swooshes in to do his usual read-from-a-book (usually Pound) routine. Christopher has a major publishing connection in the Midwest, and some goods have been delivered to him on that front. Still, it was easy for Bill and I to notice that he was disgruntled with poetry. He felt, after the collapse of 'd', that poetry was just too much of an uphill struggle, a wearisome battle against insurmountable odds. So that, when I might inquire if Christopher wanted to read some of his own work, it was pulling teeth time. Poetry as a dystopic context loomed large in my future, too, but I felt strongly that Christopher was giving up too fast, and that the big historical wave scenario requires Herculean patience. For these early nights, I linger behind Christopher in poetry as someone less published, less experienced. I was also, as he would've known, innocent of the nature of "po-biz," which turned out, years later, to have so much of nothingness and dross in it that I admired Christopher getting in the ring at all. It was not for me to say whether he was doing the right thing for himself. Looking back, This Charming Lab was doing the right thing for itself— starting small, building gradually. But in some ways, I'm already dissatisfied— my ambition for some kind of grandiosity is getting the better of me. I was young enough then to have crest-of-the-wave, media lust. So I'm split in half— delighted by being in a new place, but frustrated by a small stage and an even smaller response. Sometimes I can forget this dichotomy in a haze of pot smoke, sometimes I get depressed. Tonight the ambience is just right to allow me to get lost in it all. The Upside Down looks decent— white tiled floors, Center City's wonted high ceilings. And I get dragged by crazy Jean Walsh, Sister Ghoulish, who is occupying her own painting studio in Powelton Village, over to the Painted Bride once festivities are over at nine. Jean, a whirling dervish blonde, is a banshee on the loose among the Center City culture squad. A gypsy in spirit, she migrates from guy to guy, and scene to scene, collecting social (and sexual) trinkets. She knew, past the moodiness I evinced at the Upside Down not filling up, what buttons to push, so that Friday remained Friday, and nirvana was in attendance.

#7

I find myself, through Lee and Damon and Larsen, doing West Philly house parties too. That winter, Damon throws a house party the wildness of which I've never experienced. The drug situation is drastic— people are lining up outside the bathroom to shoot H. That's Goth: a lunge into everything "down," making an H buzz choice for them, a crystal meth buzz declasse, beyond the pale. Reach out and touch faith. Goth kids loved rituals and ritualistic behaviors, and all the tactile insignias of junk had a huge in-built glamor quotient. I was buzzed on pot as usual, and not in line to do the H routine even if I'd wanted to. The top Goths did, in fact, cut heads with H. I was not an impostor among the Goths, and here at Damon's house, but a mid-level semi-familiar presence. They liked me, the girls, because I was cute, and said strange things. I was also up on my occult lore, and was proud to announce myself (here) as a true Scorpio. Larsen, another Scorpion, is here (he doesn't mind Damon as much as Lee) with a stout, voluptuous blonde who looks like a porn star. She declares herself a Virgo princess. We get righteously stoned all over again, and then everything begins to move in slow motion. The rest of the night passes me by like a movie— I'm in a dark room with Larsen's date, but too paranoid to hit on her; I'm standing on the porch, watching someone (for some reason) dive over the railing into the front yard, and then the railing itself collapse into the yard; I'm sitting ("like a spider," someone said) watching the Goth crew dance to Bauhaus (Peter Murphy's a righteous head-of-state figure for this group); I'm noticing what everyone else noticed, that Lee failed to show up. Finally, at four a.m., I'm betraying my roots and phoning for a goddamned taxi. My truth is my truth— I'm not as nervy, as brutish, as these kids are. I don't need to suffer the torments of hitting the West Philly streets on foot at four a.m. That's why there will always be an edge of unease, sometimes, between me and the other participants in This Charming Lab. I'm not as authentically city as they are. But the middle-class sense of self-worth and polish I have is useful to them, too.

#8

By March, I manage to score a date for This Charming Lab at the Khyber Pass. It is worth noting that, in 2000, the Khyber shone as a beacon of rock success in Philly. Everyone wanted to play the Khyber, and I hustled hard to get us in there. Luminaries at the Khyber was nothing unusual. Once, later in 2000, we even managed to share a calendar with Alex Chilton. And Lisa and I met Conor Oberst there; did, in fact, make out in front of him semi-rapaciously as a gag. Who's the real heartthrob, Omaha? That having been said, not a very ambient place. The combination of low ceilings, rampant wood paneling, linoleum, dim lighting, and a bar area crammed hectically against the event space made for so-so levitation and transcendental deliverance. This group didn't find a real home until the Highwire several years later. Back to this debut night— it has to be all music. All the Station characters are becoming important in my life. Larsen's guitar player, David, was raised middle-class by two professors in Australia, of all places. He and his brother are in Philly to attend U of Penn. David is there to do math, but his attitude is lax at best. He's as good-looking as Larsen, tall, broad, and jovial. He also prides himself on sleeping around. Our main topic of conversation is music. David has a fondness for "classic rock" which Larsen doesn't share. He was broken in, as Larsen was not, and I was, to Zeppelin-Floyd, and all the other magic circuits, as an early adolescent, and to groove on the classics was second-nature to him. What's interesting to me about David is that working-class postures and attitudes fit him like a glove. He seems more authentic to the Center City scene than me. If jaunty downward mobility is the story of our early adulthood, David is more graceful and effortless about it. He knows how to look ratty, torn jeans and all, the right way. Even as the Station Svengali was the bassist, Ray, who wrote all the tunes and arranged all the shows. In any event, Station are to headline the Khyber show. Lee has become difficult to manage and I've had to exclude him. He's too narcissistic to participate in any scene. It's a shame— he writes compelling tunes. But any artistic scene requires that you be able to jump out of yourself at least part of the time, and he can't. Meanwhile, I'm having bizarre love affairs, Jean, Joan, Lisa, on the side. They add, from Logan Square, to the general feeling of expectancy, especially Jean, who carries some heaviness as a hipster goddess in Center City. A dead ringer for Nina Persson, Jean Walsh paints geometric patterns, abstractions, in a way that would later make Trish and Tobi chunder. Yet her own co-op studio space, in Powelton Village, is another way-station, with scenesters in and out all the time, and everyone looks to her for direction. With the Khyber on the horizon, I don't have trouble keeping the flock, which Trish and Tobi have not joined yet, interested. As the entire city suffers a spell, that March, of insomnia, with dope dusted with some version of crystal meth derivative, and I sit through an entire haircut stoned, at the Chop Shop on South Street, and begin learning about Temple early.

#9

Center City Philly is not just a conglomeration of artistic people for me but a conglomeration of places. I learn the character of different streets— Pine Street is genteel and refined, with several blocks devoted to antique shops and not much traffic. Walnut Street, the main thoroughfare of Center City, has everything all together— first-rate restaurants like Le Bec Fin, glamorous boutiques, four-star hotels, and, of course, Independence Hall. Chestnut Street, one block north, has a grungy feel— nothing fancy, but dollar-stores, low-end department stores, and (then) the old Sam Eric movie theater. South Street, several blocks south of Walnut and Chestnut, is (supposedly) *it*; the epicenter of Center City cultural life. But by the turn of the century, South Street has been commercialized, and even Zipperhead (a repository boutique of punk and Goth fashion where I buy my fishnet shirts) is on its last legs. What's hidden in the interstices is better than what's on the thoroughfares— Philly Java Company with its funky back room between Lombard and South on Fourth Street; the Last Drop Coffeehouse, with its high, coffered ceilings and French ambience at 13th and Pine; Dirty Frank's, the best of Center City's sleazy dive-bars, caddy-corner to it; and McGlinchey's, which serves cheap stout and lager and runs neck-in-neck with Frank's (Glinch has a better jukebox), wedged on 15th between Locust and Spruce (both inconspicuous streets with no particular identity). It's the hidden gems which make Center City for me; and I stick to them. Yet the most valuable time I spend has to be the time I spend at home in Logan Square. Logan Square is quirky— the most important quirk is that not everyone even knows it as Logan Square. To many, even experienced Center City hipsters, it's just a neighborhood comprised of a bunch of streets without a name. Yet the closeness to Logan Circle on Race Street, an elaborate sculpture-fountain which kids swim in over the summer (and I swam in once during the summer after my freshman year at CHS) with a ring of benches in a circle around it, means that it's an even mix of those willing to call the neighborhood Logan Square, and those unwilling to give it that appellation. To me, it doesn't matter— it's my home. I felt that way as soon as I moved in, in the late summer of '99. I live on 21st Street, and the view from my second floor bay windows is astonishingly rich. South-east, the skyline, dominated by the Liberty Place towers. North-east, the back of the Franklin Institute. Due north, the beginnings of the parkway (which means that every July 4th, where I live is flooded with bodies); due south, a movement back to grunge from Arch onto Market Street. Nothing grungy about Logan Square; large, sleek white row-houses which actually house studio, one or two bedroom apartments, and a few normal apartment buildings (like Westminster Arch, where I will move in 2008). Pete's Famous Pizza, east down the block at 21st and Cherry, offers simple diner fare for reasonable prices, and good company. As of 2000, I like to do breakfast there when I can. Around the corner on Race, Wagon Train Deli, where I can always pick up morning coffee. In short, I couldn't dream of a better neighborhood to set up shop in than Logan Square in '99-2000. It means that all my adventures in cultural delinquency happen against the backdrop of having a place to crash that I actually care about. It also means that

at any moment, the chiaroscuro of human life could settle on a blazing sense of brightness, based on contingent circumstances around me. The backdrop, set in place, contradicted all the alienation I felt in my adolescence and replaced it with a sense that there could always be some graciousness in the human world, the human continuum, somewhere.

#10

What develops very fast for me in Center City is a need to prioritize. Everything seems to be leading me away from literature and into music; so music (for the time being) is what I decide to stick to for a while. I've kept contacts in New York and can record there almost whenever I want and for free. I try to shop these recordings around to Philly independent labels, with little initial luck. Center City, like the East Village in the late Nineties, has no in-built scene to speak of. At a young age, and sharp enough to be status-conscious (which Larsen and the rest of the Lab crew aren't), I drooled at the idea of getting signed. The first Khyber show is a one-off— I'm to be backed by a drummer and bass player who are only signed on for that show. As had happened in State College and New York, I had trouble finding musicians to play with. The night of the show (a chilly April night) is hectic, and the Station guys dominate it. They have a redhead named Nora, who David is apparently shagging, following them around with a video camera. Station are the headline act, and most of the crowd shows up to see them. To me, there's something profoundly joyless about the whole experience— not just because me and my music are relegated to the sidelines, but because the Station guys are "hamming it up." They come across as attractive but irresponsible and (potentially) unprofessional. This Charming Lab has already established a few rules and folkways. One is that the after-parties have to beat the gigs. We roll, stoned, down the Olde City streets, too high to care about status— and the chill leaves the air.

#11

The vibe between Larsen and I is interesting— it's clear to me that Larsen was raised working-class, but his parents are Europeans, mostly Belgian. Larsen has traveled all over Europe. He doesn't necessarily fit into the Center City scene any better than I do. Larsen's social niche falls between the Goth and punk scenes, and he's perpetually obsessing over some girl or other. We're both true-blue with the ladies. He's not skeasy like the Cheltenham guys I grew up with— he nails his girls before he obsesses about them. I'm having some luck on that level too— we commiserate. Larsen's angle is always the same— the guys who get the most (so to speak) also get trampled the most. It's headed towards summer and we're always stoned as we walk around. Larsen is ambitious but undisciplined— he's not writing the Station songs. Ray, the bass player, runs the show from the side, and lets Larsen and David front the band. I sense quickly (and with alacrity) that Larsen could get me into trouble. The weed we smoke sometimes seems laced; we take joyrides in "ambiguously owned" cars (Larsen is good at "borrowing"). Larsen, during these years, has an odd light of luck around him which I'm instinctive enough to notice. He has more wheels turning and more lines running than Chris DeLuca, who would've appreciated Larsen's showmanship angles. And his cars. Or Eddie Jacoby, who would see instantly how avuncular Larsen could be, amidst all the quid pro quo stuff. Fun for Josie, too. To make a long story short, Larsen (with David on the side) effortlessly corrupts me. The system has to work, because I'm getting them gigs. There's something in the bank for all of us.

#12

As summer rolls in, it seems to me that This Charming Lab needs to plan something big. A little press would be nice, but we haven't dealt with the higher rungs of bands yet. If I could get, for example, the Eyeliners onboard for a show, we'd finally have the right wattage. I put together some money and rent out the Killtime Warehouse in West Philly. It's usually used for punk shows and meetings of radicals, and it's run by a ring of junkies. Station will play, of course, and I've roped in the Eyeliners (an all-girl band who do girly schmaltzy indie-punk), and Bill and Dara, and a miscellaneous cast of others. About an hour into the show, and with very few people having shown up, I make a fatal mistake— I let the Eyeliners smoke me up. It's potent weed and I'm blitzed enough to begin enjoying myself. The problem is, at about ten p.m. throngs of people begin to show up to see the Eyeliners. I'm supposed to be collecting money at the door, and I'm too skittish and paranoid to do so. I try to enlist Bill and Dara to do it but they're even more non compos mentis than I am. It's a little disillusioning no one pitches in— This Charming Lab was supposed to be a co-op. If I'm the only one trying (and the Station guys are too high and mighty to do menial work, off chatting up girls), TCL isn't going to be what I thought it was, even as no one left.

#13

One thing I've noticed is that This Charming Lab isn't making me happy. I'm a bundle of nerves. The reason would have to be that what happened at the Killtime signifies— I'm running the show by myself. On the side are nice times— with girls, or fucking around with Bill and Pete on lazy stoned West Philly afternoons. But the business of trying to push a bunch of acts forward is wearing me down. My own tunes I'm trying to sell at these shows form a whole— "The Seduction of Sara Starr." While I'm in shape to play them, nobody seems to listen. David does, and I appreciate it— but Larsen has a bunch of defenses up. So does Lee. Bill and Pete are unabashedly "junk-rooted," and my tunes are too classicist for them. I always have an acute sense of my own smallness— and what's in the air is that the Philly free press has blacklisted us. We're either too unprofessional or too gauche, or both. No one in the Philly press corps likes my ambition, either. They don't want a scene in Philly, especially one which translates nationally or internationally. They like doing hit-and-run routines where they cast bands or performers up, then shoot them down again. Yet it's all very confusing, because I've lived in New York, and I failed to see any great racket there. I'm sharp enough to realize quickly— where music is concerned, I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is my first, and most hurtful, Center City tragedy, but I take it in stride.

#14

One branch I've got going which many of my friends don't notice is an interest in modern and post-modern art. By this time, I'm fascinated by post-modernity generally, and I learn the charmed names— Warhol, Nauman, Koons. Nauman, especially, attracts me— the West Coast, stalagmite creepiness of his early video work (product, I can't help but believe, of high marijuana intake), matched with a penchant for absurdism, balance out the direct and uncompromising brutishness of the East Coast life I'm leading. My nightly routine, when I get home from Barnes & Noble (where both I and Lisa work as booksellers) and when I happen to be alone, involves a pile of post-modern art books and approximately two bowls of weed. If I like Basquiat's playfulness, I'm repulsed by the vacuity of Jeff Koons; if Paul McCarthy is a bit too Willy Wonka, Ed Ruscha's sense of language, space, and minimalism in two dimensions gets under my skin. New York art, I learn, likes to stay on the surface, with big, bold gestures about the guts it takes to take up space in the world. The sense of spirituality is just about raw courage, raw guts. When Warhol, for instance, means it, that's what you get. Because PMA is a short walk from Logan Square, I am there often, gawking at the Great Stair Hall, and Diana, trying to decide how much of the past centuries work I can assimilate (like Rubens' Prometheus), and not just settle for what's there that everybody knows. Including, it turns out, the famous Nauman neon "The true artist…," which I've been vibing the right way at home. There's no one to talk with about visual art yet; but a young lady named Trish Webber works with me at B & N, and I have my eyes on her. There's a high and mightiness to Ms. Webber against post-modernity, which is very crisp. Trish likes the Renaissance and is a student of Renaissance Humanism. The first few months I know Trish Webber, and am informed of her association with PAFA, she's terse, slightly defensive when I define myself to her as an artist. It is by no means love at first sight. Even if, in the parlance of those times, she's a Gwyneth and a half. Once, in the summer of 2000, I called her randomly. I don't even remember how I got her number. She was still with John from Media, another aesthete, who I grew to like very much. The phone call, however, tanked fast. For Trish, I later learned, there was a version of Pride and Prejudice playing itself out. John wasn't directly competitive with her the way I was. Still, in 2000 that's in the background. Conversely, it's taken for granted by me by 2000 that visual art for me is both an interest and an issue. When I walk around Center City stoned, I try to imagine what life would look like through a painter's eyes— West Philly, especially, is oddly picturesque, and many of the houses (half-dilapidated though they might be) are exquisite, as is all the architecture in Philly. I can still walk around with a good clean buzz on; if there is any danger, I don't notice it. For Bill and Pete (who, together, prefer the spaciness of semi-primitive, semi-formal art, somewhere between New York and Philly) and I, this is what everything reduces to— a buzz. We move forward on waves from the buildings.

#15

So: my interest in post-modern art leads me to the PMA. The modern art section has in it the Bruce Nauman neon, Jasper Johns' "Painting with Two Balls," and a cache of late-period Rothkos. I'm even more struck how Cubist Picasso looks up close; by the Renaissance art on the second floor; and by the Calder mobile in the Great Stair Hall I'd forgotten having seen as a kid. Bill and Christopher appreciate my need to talk about such things, but the This Charming Lab musical crew turn a deaf ear. As summer wears on, we do Doc Watson's and the Philly Fringe Festival at the Upside Down. The Fringe people don't give us any special treatment; we're "local," and all their hype goes to national and international acts. The culminating Fringe show for us happens at a venue called La Tazza 108 (an extension of Christopher's La Tazza in Manayunk) at Front and Chestnut. I have friends coming in from New York and D.C. to play, including Samantha Fry, who will remain a presence for many years, as a hold-out from my Manhattan time. But the lack of press around This Charming Lab shows; there's no buzz. Into the fall, I have the conviction that this has to end. We've been black-listed in Philly and there's no way up for us. My writing during this epoch is a scattershot enterprise. On a day to day basis, I may choose to churn something out, I may not. Piles of poems line the tops of bookshelves and the large wooden desk which closes my living room space. My reading habits, beyond art books, are also a scattershot hodge-podge of classics, near-classics, and juvenilia-engendering kitsch. That's why rock then had to be a trap for me. I can't mean it like everybody else. Tons of bands start playing to empty rooms and work their way up. With my interest in pursuing books and visual art, I know, in a tragic way of knowing, that I don't have the patience to face those empty rooms for years just to get indie-signed and go rock-ballistic. Bill Rosenblum lives then up 21st Street close to Chestnut. Not Logan Square anymore, but Logan Square-ish. He's a fun companion who generally understands where I'm at. Bill's flat is a low-ceiling'd, shabbily furnished, barely windowed mess. Everything's strewn everywhere. Still, it's another safe haven where I can get some rest and some peace. Bill introduces me to another level of visually rich kitsch: comic books. Bill's crazy about color combinations and graphics, as Christopher is. Comic book and other kinds of graphic art have a lot invested in punch, verve, pizzazz. They are, of course, very close to Pop. What Bill taught me, both verbally and with his comic books, turned out to be important: in art, as in everything else, get your kicks where you find them. Whatever gets you off, gets you off. Art is supposed to be fun. Have and maintain the integrity of your own individual tastes, even if it's Adult Swim on Cartoon Network. Even at this very early stage of the game, I knew that Trish and Bill are semi-obvious enemies. I try out some of Bill's tenets where she can hear; Trish Webber seems to look at me strangely. It begins to emerge, even with Lisa Tomasino, by this time, standing front and center: there's an attraction there. Even with indie rock as a semi-consuming interest, Trish can see that what I'm doing with poetry and books is serious, and meant to be taken seriously. She knows I'm intelligent; and she can see that I'm absorbing the entire history of visual art, as well. I can be cultivated. What is invisible to me, as someone who will later learn the whole

story, is that as of the turn of the century, Trish Webber is a painter kicked into high gear. The Nineties, for Trish, had been a time of tumult and strife, as they had been for me; but a past which screamed Girl, Interrupted had been shed, so that Trish could take Center City, and PAFA located in Center City, as much by storm as possible. The old demons, however, of mental instability and incipient madness, remained, so that, despite a highly ordered façade, Trish could at any moment be returned to Girl, Interrupted territory. Yet all the dynamism of what was happening in her brain gave her a seductive, exciting edge. As other situations, from Lisa to This Charming Lab, played themselves out, I had, without knowing it, eighteen months of Trish Webber lingering in my life as a question mark to look forward to. Trish's tallness (5'7), blondness and lankiness aligned her, appearance-wise, with Jena Strayner; her voice leaned towards alto over soprano, and to a slight huskiness. Lisa Tomasino hated her instantly. Who, herself was aligned with Jena Strayner for the other reason: Lisa was a country girl from the South gone urban. She could only find Trish to be a pretentious bitch. All derived from a stern, brunette mentality, which guided Lisa to look at B & N itself as her road up. For eighteen months, it was hang-fire on all these counts. While it was, Trish dabbled in other guys, and partly remained with her hubs from Media. I was only dimly aware where things were going. The ladies, Trish and Lisa, both knew from the beginning.

#16

The night of the 2000 election is a strange one. I'm working a closing shift at B & N, and a call comes in for me from Elizabeth Yankel, editor of a regional print journal based in Philadelphia called American Writing. American Writing is ranked high enough (Christopher endorses it too, and they carry it at Borders) that this call from Elizabeth (to inform me that one of my poems, "Icarus in New York," would be published in the next issue) gives me an almost unbearable sense of exhilaration. Like the rest of America, I'm up all night waiting for an election verdict. It never happens. But my ass is kicked into gear by what American Writing is, and the new task is to jump into poetry head-first. I want to be thorough— rather than sticking to the texts I know (Beats, Bukowski, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, etc), I want to learn the right histories and ground myself in them. I start with a vengeance— Pound's Cantos, the Greek tragedians, Eliot's Four Quartets. But the most profound breakthrough occurs one night at B & N, as I'm goofing off— on impulse, I pick up the Collected Poems of John Keats. I flip straight to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and when I hit "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ are sweeter…" my brain turns on its axis. This proves to be the most important moment of my poetry life— discovering the English Romantics. Discovering the Romantics wasn't just discovering a group of poets— it was my entrée into a world of high-level formality in in art. This is a world the enterprise of which had always been undercooked in the United States. But Keats and Wordsworth drew me in and, as it were, sucker-punched me into an acknowledgement that formality didn't have to mean sterile stuffiness— it could be warm, it could be human. How I related to Keats' Odes, in particular, was as a challenge to develop and maintain a new form of consciousness, which made American poetry look like child's play. That's what was missing from New York art— a sense that a work of art could, or should be, beautiful. Also, that serious work should live up to a serious standard, rather than taking short-cuts and acting as a bellwether of degeneracy and trans-aesthetic mania. This was the ultimate irony for me— that when formality in art laid down a gauntlet and forced a response in my life, it opened the door for Trish and Tobi to walk through, and ushered in the most warm, most human era I had ever known. It didn't lock me in an Ivory tower or force me to lose myself in narcissism. Rather, Trish and I, in about a year's time, would start working on a relationship so all-over-the-place, so rich in fruitful contradictions, that I would have to spend the rest of my life recovering my wits. Trish was like N, but to the Nth. N-isimus. Including concupiscence. It all manifested because I saw in Keats and Wordsworth what she saw in Renaissance painting. As it stands, on this night I'm still ensconced with Lisa, who is tolerant but not shot through with electricity regarding these issues. Trish, before the fun starts, approves instantly. "John was like Lord Byron," she says.

#17

Through dealing with Elizabeth Yankel, I'm introduced to the Center City literary old guard. Many of the men are gay; if they scope me out, it's to determine if I mean "action." Joe Miller fits this profile; an old friend of Elizabeth's who lives in a duplex apartment at Seventh and Bainbridge. His most prized possession is a photo of himself and a bearded, bespectacled Allen Ginsberg, taken backstage at the Painted Bride in the Seventies. It's on the wall of his study; the other wall is covered by long bookshelves filled with recent poetry books. Joe seems to have read everything; to know what he's talking about. His real penchant is for Philly literary gossip (particularly among the gay poets), and he considers himself the raconteur of the tribe. His heyday, he always says, was the Eighties; that was the peak, the time Philly poetry really swung. There were readings every night and everyone slept with everyone. I wonder if it's all blarney. The hitch with me is that I'm straight. Nevertheless, I arrange a bunch of readings for us to do together— at bookstores, music venues, even at the Kelly Writers House on the Penn campus (I'm finishing my degree at Penn.) The readings are half-festive, half-strained; but because I happen to be sleeping with girls, I deny Joe the gossip-angles he wants. Elizabeth, I'm later to learn, has the same reservations about me that Joe does. For the gays in this tribe, art and gossip seem to be inseparable; are, in fact, flip sides of the same coin.

#18

The old guard are reserved about me; they refuse to deal with Christopher at all. Christopher is pompous about being young and fresh; he'll do anything not to be a bore. The sensibility finger points from Christopher to Morrissey and straight back to Oscar Wilde. As might be expected, Christopher is sexually ambiguous; he frequently makes flirtatious remarks in my direction. But, I notice over the first few years I know him, he only seems to date girls. Bisexuality is one of his adopted poses. Maybe. Joe Miller and Christopher, when they run into each other, have nothing to say. Christopher, at this time, has several poems out in the Columbia Poetry Review. Christopher's writing is more avant-garde than Joe's or Elizabeth's; bits of Pound, Cummings, and "Pop" kitsch. I never lose the sense that Chris is based in Manayunk, which is its own place (at a tangent to Center City) and with its own ethos. Main Street, Manayunk, is posh like Walnut Street, but smaller, more sedate, and cozier. Drinking in Manayunk (as Christopher and I are wont to do) is peaceful and, especially in spring and summer, decidedly a glamorous experience. Some of the glamour Christopher has for me is Manayunk glamour, and he does come off sometimes as a Manayunk transplant in Center City. The first important reading I do with Christopher is at Villanova University (he's an alumnus) on a cool spring night in '01, with J.R. Mitchum. We read to about fifteen female undergrads, and they treated us like big-shots. Who could ask for more? Yet, in hindsight, I am destined to realize a number of things about Christopher at this time. Philly around us is swinging quite nicely culturally, thank you very much. Christopher appears to be an actively-engaged, first-tier participant, and in many ways he is. But it would take someone more seasoned than me to decipher what leaked out of him, as we drank on those Manayunk nights. The truth is, that by 2001, Christopher associates his life in art with something that's already over, already in the past. I know the wide parameters that were set for him at Villanova— that the whole campus was familiar with him and his antics, not just with books but with movie cameras and video art, too. Just as Philly was swinging, the whole campus had swung around him. He was a hipster king, and did not lack for minions, either. I know these things, but Christopher is delicate about revealing what later becomes obvious— this time, on the Villanova campus, was when he was happiest by far. He had everything he needed. Where he lives in Manayunk as of '01 is a mystery, but a dark-edged one. And Christopher avoiding Logan Square and my apartment is dark-edged, too. Christopher is a creature of myth, and mythology, and the nights he commuted from Villanova to Manayunk and back, in the prime of 'd' magazine, were the nights that lived up to his bohemian ideal. What 'd' was took Christopher's myth and concretized it, gave it definite form. Everything for him coalesced around the 'zine and his editorship. Every once in a while one of us would say "I propose a toast…to 'd' magazine!" I erred, though, when I thought Christopher was ready to move on to new enterprises. He was stuck on his time as a big fish in a small pond. So we read at Villanova at in '01 in a reasonable way, but Christopher was looking for something, a moment, he could never find again. While it was

always wry to remember the rejection slip I'd received from 'd', Christopher was not forthcoming about how he schematized himself and was confined in his own myths. I found out later.

#19

Bill Rosenblum and I are still working together intermittently. Bill lives in a studio apartment on 21st Street between Chestnut and Market. It's filthy— Bill lives like a pig. But Bill already has a primitive Pro Tools set-up, which means he can record me cheaply and (somewhat) efficiently. I have a cache of songs I wrote in the spring of '96— folk songs, for us to record. One thing I have now also is an album on mp3.com, which I can add to. Bill and I maintain our own routine— record, smoke a little pot, repeat. Bill's infinitely distractible, and I try not to be impatient. He even gets me to watch "Adult Swim" and "Space Ghost," as I did as a teenager. The album doesn't do much— I have a difficult time promoting it (having "offed" myself from doing live gigs in Philly). Everything feels liminal to me except Penn— it's the new centerpiece of my life. College Hall, Van Pelt, Bennett Hall are golden for me; and I covet the armature of an Ivy League education. As I expected, Penn only transferred two years worth of credits from Penn State. Now, in my mid-twenties, I prioritize getting my degree. Christopher, Elizabeth, Bill, and the rest know this is happening— but my life is becoming strictly compartmentalized into discrete bits, which don't always cohere. I will use Trish Webber, later, to bind the whole thing together.

#20

There's a poetry reading circuit in Center City which I'm now heavily involved in. Other than the old guard and Christopher, some contenders subsist who are nearly my age. D.P. Plunkett is a rising star on this circuit. He happens to be ten years older than me. D.P. is bisexual, obese, and his poetry is all rough edges and dirty jokes. Most of it doesn't make too much literal sense. In the urban queer socialite world he lives in, it doesn't need to. He, like most of the old guard, is a historical naïf where poetry is concerned— he's read very little pre-1960. He also, as a high-school dropout raised out in the sticks, loathes U of Penn. It seems natural that we take an instant, intense dislike to each other. His sordid history with Elizabeth and Joe ended in rancor on all sides. I spot D.P.'s big weakness— he needs to be buffeted by people (preferably poets) on all sides. D.P. has one major henchman; a bouncer/poet from Southwest Philly named Doug Winter. Winter goes in for the same gibberish-cum-politically correct queer proselytizing/posturing Plunkett does. Whatever social games come to fruition around them are planned by Doug and D.P. together. They run a reading series out of La Tazza 108. I go sometimes with Christopher. Christopher detests them, but there aren't many reading series in Center City which deliver the "action-quotient" we want, and this is one. We learn fast; there's no use trying to talk with D.P. or Doug unless you're part of their in-crowd. Neither of us is prepared to make much of an effort. This, because Christopher and I have maintained ourselves through these years as two very proud dudes. Christopher always sits, with a certain amount of satisfaction, on the work he did at Villanova. He must live with the fact that it's not highly visible yet. While he doesn't quite qualify as a *poet maudit*, he is familiar with the attitude that, irrespective of his fluctuating worldly circumstances, he has already completed a body of work which will rise into prominence at some point. I support Christopher completely— my stint writing for Outlaw Playwrights in State College always girds up, bulks up the sense of having enough creative ammo to get me through my days. We both bear the burden of persevering in Philly, rather than New York, which is more where we're supposed to be, to be as major as we believe ourselves to be, at this time. And we've done what we've done as two very real dudes. We see Doug and D.P. as hostile mirror reflections— scenesters who substitute social gamesmanship for talent, let alone genius. Through the whole liminal period of the early Aughts, we work around scenes like this and try and establish something worthwhile, both in and out of the accepted Center City circuits. Christopher, who will at least accept the Warhol challenge from New York, snaps pictures relentlessly.

#21

Oddly enough, many of the characters who accrued to my life through This Charming Lab are still around. Larsen remains as recklessly lucky as ever. One summer day in '01, we take one of his girlfriends canoeing on the Delaware. It's very pleasant— we stop at all the little islands to smoke pot, and we're right in the heart of the wilderness. If Larsen's girlfriend almost kills us on the drive home (she's driving stoned, and super-erratically), we don't notice much. Larsen's recklessness is contagious. The Buckners are around, though I've ditched my Goth attire. Occasionally, I'll do a reading with Bill Rosenblum playing keyboards behind me. This happens at least once at Tritone at 16th and South. The shift from music to poetry isn't seamless— I still get in heartbroken moods about my failed attempt to become a successful indie rocker. But another force is gaining momentum in Center City at this time— a bunch of Swarthmore grads are putting together machinery behind a new, iconoclastic, monthly free paper. It's to be called the Philadelphia Independent. The editor is another Bill— Bill Pearl. Bill approaches me to see if there's anything I might like to write for the Independent. We settle on an idea which doesn't satisfy my artist's ego, but does assure me a wide audience fast— an astrology column. Because I write it in a tough-minded way, Bill calls it "The Rizzoscope," after erstwhile Philly mayor Frank Rizzo. I notice the other Independent staffers, especially indie princess Sara Blount. The Independent has boxes like the other weeklies; what it gives Center City is an edge towards youth, freshness, liberal values, and educated quirk.

#22

Fast forward, slightly: like the rest of America, I struggle every New Years Eve, at around 10 pm, with the notice that another New Years Eve will soon have passed me by without anything meaningful having accrued to it. The New Years Eve ratio I carry, of the good ones to the bad ones, the momentous ones to the boring ones, is pretty piss-poor. So it is with some relief that I make an announcement: the New Years Eve connecting 2002-2003, which was spent in the company of Trish Webber and Tobi Simon, lived up for once to the hype of what New Years Eve is supposed to amount to. West Philadelphia: known to the rest of America, at that time, for the dubious distinction of what the MOVE incident amounted to in the mid-Eighties. Why that needed national exposure, who knows. The day the drama unfolded, I was playing a little league game, and learned from center field, with my mouth full of Big League Chew, or was it Gator Gum, that yes, the bomb had been dropped by Mayor Goode on the Africa family. As usual, Philly kvetches when left out of national media circuits, but gets nonchalant when the thing happens. Bomb dropped, I fielded a ground ball single and lobbed the shortstop the ball, reflecting nonchalance back to the adults, including coaches, huddled outside the dugouts. Where Trish lived was, which had become a second home to me, was only a few short blocks from Osage Avenue. But, outside the parameters of MOVE and media hype, West Philadelphia had some valid points of vitality, down to the fact that Osage Avenue has on it several houses striped bourgeois. Trish lived on Baltimore Avenue, the main drag of West Philadelphia. It was, as of '02-'03, a melting pot of Penn students, artists, hippies, and counter-cultural types or Chomsky-ites, many black, many not. West Philly was, and remains, remarkable for its own many-striped insistence on changing from block to block. Ivy-strewn semi-mansions could and can be caddy-corner tenements at any moment. The architectural overtones of the place were, and remain, rustically elegant and elegantly rustic. We got Indian takeout that night, because West Philly is also strong on ethnic, and world cuisine. By the time we dug into our samosas, Trish, Tob, and I were also righteously stoned, and the house, shared by Trish and where she had a room on the second floor, with easy access on either side down to the kitchen or the foyer area, was swarming with people. For once, I felt a sense of a charmed New Years Eve, with all the ingredients mixed the right way so that inside and outside co-mingled, the sense of a festive occasion was really felt, too. Bill Rosenblum showing up, bass in hand, to play a little music, rebooted the whole thing up all over again. I picked up somebody's Telecaster, in the spare second floor bedroom, and the drums were manned by an anonymous geek I'd seen around: *gonna take a walk…up to Union Square…you never know…what you're gonna find there*. The waves were big enough to float on. And it was taken for granted that the evening would end with nuptial rites earned by both Trish and I, individually and reciprocally. Even those we got through, and still found ourselves roaming around the house. We settled, in the end, on the couch on the wide wooden front porch, which tended to belie that 4325 was, in fact, a twin. Across the street, in Clark Park, a group of teenagers were playing a drunken soccer game in the

winter chill. “Why don’t you go play with them?” I managed to express to Trish, “Soccer wasn’t really one of my sports. I was better at baseball.” But we had fun watching the action, then drifting upstairs, more of the same, and into peaceful sleep. Happy New Years.

#23

The occasion in human life in which an individual is able to rectify what would seem to be irremediable wounds and irreconcilable differences and genuinely come full circle, in a spirit of harmonious balance— not frequent. Rare. I did it then, though. Trish and I sat on the wooden deck back porch of my family's house in Glenside, smoked an entire joint to toast a glorious mid-spring day. The back yard was lumpy, sloped downwards, the screened in porch next to the wooden deck was a grateful luxury, but Trish and I sat still in the 75-degree weather and felt like going nowhere, so we did. This wasn't the house I'd been raised in— I'd actually been raised in maybe a dozen different houses, scattered around Cheltenham, also Mt. Airy, Oxford Avenue-area North-East Philly, and The Presidential apartment complex on City Line Avenue— but Glenside, the most together, down-home, *verite* real-small town section of Cheltenham, was as familiar as the rest. Not only to be with Trish, smoking up on Lindley Road, but to take her down Easton Road, Glenside's main drag (the other boroughs of Cheltenham Township not having main drags, exactly), and show her the sights— the 7-11 where Ted Gissman and I tried to buy cigarettes, West Coast Video where we'd chase I Spit On Your Grave with the actual movie 10,000 Maniacs, Boston Market which used to be a Roy Rogers where my band and I used to eat after our rehearsals freshman year, even Hibberts Stationary who refused to hire me summer after summer despite impeccable Honors-English credentials— Trish not liking the petrified tarantula's corpse encased in Humphrey's Pest Control's windows— and it all meant the same thing. Because Glenside, within Cheltenham, was a real deal kind of place, a real town, because it was spring and we had the dope we needed, because Trish and I were making the right Center City inroads to understanding we could be who we wanted to be at least some of the time, I felt a sense of oneness with Easton Road and the rest I had missed as an adolescent. Lindley Road was not uptight then. And if, that night, as the *piece de resistance*, Trish and I parked in front of CHS to smoke a final half-bowl (Trish humoring the peccadillo of a would-be Wordsworth or Proust strutting his stuff), it meant something blended, about revenge but also acceptance, spite but also forgiveness, exultation shot through with permanent longing. Trish could never know all this was happening to me on an interior level. The ancient days: I had learned to drive on a manual and was still freaked out by an automatic. Know what I mean? The victory lap, down Easton, over and around to Limekiln Pike, so Trish could see the famous Wawa where N was unceremoniously dumped by another yearbook-geek, and Tail of the Whale, took us up to Church Road and Bob's Big Boy, where I almost totaled the Jetta in '93 while attempting a left turn, then we wound back over to Lindley. Just another night for us, but only sort of. When Trish and I once in a while crashed in the 'burbs, I noticed it was a time of peace and harmonious balance for her, too. "I like Easton Road," she said. "Media has nothing like it. It gives an impression of wholeness. I just wish Hibberts had given you that job. We could use that dough now." She giggled, I agreed, but the occasional nights in Glenside were ones of peace, and the full-circle

dream become a reality, for which I'll always be grateful.

#24

It's early 2004. Elizabeth died a year ago; I've cut ties with Joe Miller. Trish rewired my brain. It would be impossible to overstate how many ways my years with her altered my consciousness. Ms. Webber laid down a gauntlet to help me understand that I should be proud of my impulses towards the sublime. Yet, the gauntlets were often laid down while holding court for Tobi and I in her rooms in West Philly, righteously stoned on the kindest varieties of dope. That admixture— a penchant for form, or the sublime, in a lust-for-life kind of gal, and a blonde no less, was heady stuff. She was N, she was Jena, she was Kathy, she was everyone in my earlier life I ever cared about. And we'd spent a few years spending all our nights together— West Philly and Logan Square, back and forth. We broke up at the end of '03, after two years, because, to make a long story short, her insanity was driving me insane. Also important for me to notice: Trish was a loved and hated kind of gal, as well. She was herself, she was unique, she was incisively about what she was incisively about. I had to see mirrored back to me, through Trish Webber, what I already knew: to be ensconced in a creative discipline, and to do it in a unique, distinctive way, has, of necessity, to make an individual as hated as they are loved. People don't always like the real ones, the unique ones. Lots of seemingly creative types are faux, and would gladly have everyone stand in a line, subsume themselves. Uniqueness magnetizes, but also repulses. As does real artistic potency. Catapulted back into a present moment: I'm doing a reading in Northern Liberties for an online journal called Lunge. It's not just me— there's a bunch of bands playing, short films, and a team of technicians doing "ambient." The crowd is a hundred-plus; it's a gorgeous spring day; the mood is festive. The multi-media angle reminds me so much of Swinging London (my imagination of it, at least) that I get, as in '99, an intense frisson. Philadelphia attracts celestial sunlight. It occurs to me that now might be the time to write the second chapter of This Charming Lab— that the moment might be germane for it. Meanwhile, Bill Rosenblum is producing an album for me. We're recording at his pad at 11thand Webster— "Webster Street Studios." The album was supposed to be just spoken-word; but we expanded and expanded until it looked like we would reach an album's full of tunes. Bill imposes a Steve Albini ethos. Through Bill, I'm introduced to what the Highwire Gallery is, in the Gilbert Building on the PAFA (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) campus. I begin to put pieces together— this is where I could stage the sequel I've been considering. The curator is an erstwhile roadie for the Grateful Dead— Jim O'Rourke. He's older— short, thin, intense, a redhead. The Highwire is a space to die for; several rooms, all with high ceilings, including one which looks like a cleared-out factory space. Still, the man-power is missing; Christopher works, but I need more running-buddies for this new "trip." Simultaneously, I graduated magna cum laude from U of Penn and geared up for grad school, which would start low res in the Boston 'burbs. Between Penn and hipster-ism, I was an absolute freak.

#25

I met John Rind at the Last Drop at around this time. John was twenty, and had been raised in Center City, Colorado, Bellefonte (State College suburb) and elsewhere by an interesting family. His Mom was a therapist; his deceased father, who cast a long impinging shadow on his son, had been a hustler and a card-shark; his brother, who was my age, had been murdered on a college campus years before; and his older sister Kyra was a burgeoning fashionista in New York. The tragedies in John's life gave him a precocious sense of humanity; he carried himself like someone who had been through crises. From the moment I met him, there was never a doubt from him that his own life was deep water to wade, swim, or stand in, and that drowning was always both a temptation and a possibility. The dark edges built into John are at odd angles to the dark edges built into Christopher, but they are prominent and not concealed by the man himself. He was extraordinarily good-looking, was John: 6'3, thin, with piercing brown eyes, curly dark hair, and finely drawn-in features. Truthfully, he looked like he could be my cousin. Providentially, he was also artistic— a junior at University of the Arts, majoring in film. John liked to relate to his life as a series of visions, and I empathized. His nexus was all artistic kids. U of Arts (Sara Blount was another grad) has its own social niche in Center City— the archetypal U of Arts undergrad is a snotty, sexy, know-it-all brat who WILL make it, they believe, by hook or crook. Older Philadelphians take for granted that these kids, who were often found shacked up at the Last Drop as we were, will soon be derailed by circumstance into eternal waiters, bartenders, and service-industry goons. But John's not snotty with me at all (as Sara is). His attitude is flexible and open. Do the math, I later realized: therapist Mom, casino-freak Dad. He's also a damned good hustler— between his imposing height, looks, charm, and barfly style (he's also precociously sub-alcoholic), he can only be an asset. DeLuca-level showmanship. To add even more sauce, John is an active bisexual, as his father was. He oozes seduction in all directions, out of all of his pores. Furthermore, we wind up working together at B & N, which assures us a context and constant contact. This is how the fun started— the sense that John and I were a team. And Christopher.

#26

Christopher Severin was in. I'd enlisted him. What I felt we needed was a square— four guys. Ricky Flint, who worked with John and I at B & N, was a half-obvious choice. He was a science guy (grad of U of Chicago) who was also into literature; good-looking, in the manner of the three of us (dark hair and eyes; like me, bearded); a wild drinker and libertine; and a penchant for head-butting, intellectual and otherwise. I knew instinctively he would be the most difficult of the other three to manage. He had some issues with U of Penn; with what I was writing; with how I was running things, even before we began to put shows together. Ricky, in fact, veers dangerously close, as John's Mom would've noticed, to sociopathy. Yet this was the big city and we were young cultural types on the move and, as so often happens, Ricky' apropos looks saved the day; appearances dictated his acceptance. The four of us together from night to night, bar to bar, club to club, looked absolutely spectacular. I doubt, in retrospect, that Center City Philadelphia ever saw a festival of male brunettes quite as riveting as us. It was a bravado front, and no squirrels need apply even to sit shotgun in our vehicles. And, importantly, John and Ricky hit it off like a house on fire; two kids in their early twenties (Ricky was twenty-three), solidly Center City, rabid for new (or, in Ricky's case, any) experience; their circuit was tight. So tight, in fact, that often Christopher and I couldn't get a word (or a drink) in edgewise. Ricky likes to spite us two old fogies by sticking to John— but not sexually. Ricky's straightness was also tight. The foursome was split down the middle by that issue, but I always thought the tension heightened the glamor. Maybe you know who you're seeing, maybe you don't. The tensest circuit in the square is Christopher-Ricky; they're both hotheaded control freaks, and they don't get on. Where Christopher is concerned, Ricky starts with shoot-down routines immediately. The dark aspect of DeLuca-ism. Just generally, what Ricky brings to the table is some light (vivid, educated intelligence) and a whole lot of darkness. But the fire which animates him isn't introspective or artistic; it has a harsh, destructive edge.

#27

I still remembered the Lunge event in Northern Liberties, my frisson, and Swinging London. One of my abiding Swinging London fixations had been the London Free School— a loose conglomeration of artists, musicians, and curators who staged multi-media events around London through the "Swinging" Sixties years. Even before I enlisted the other three, I decided to call our group the Philly Free School. Ricky, of course, had to argue the finer points of why it needs to be called this, even as John and Christopher didn't resist. If we were going to use the Highwire Gallery as the dominant space, it was inescapable that Jim O'Rourke would be a dominant influence. Jim was an odd mix of East and West Coast attributes— he'd be the first to light a joint for you when you showed up to negotiate with him; he'd always deliver some kind of goods (hash brownies, nitrous tanks) to create a suitably debauched ambience for your events; but he could also get East Coast intense about money and logistics. His vibe was very unique, and people tended either to love him or hate him. Luckily for the Philly Free School, John and I in particular clicked with him instantly. In fact, the John-Adam circuit was as much about channeling the West Coast as it was about channeling 60s London. So the square, aided and abetted by Jim O'Rourke, began to plan events. And when we hit the streets, everybody stared.

#28

The first Philly Free School event was held in July 2004. There were some physical characteristics to the Highwire Gallery space which facilitated the event. The west-facing wall was all windows. The event began in the late afternoon, then into the evening, and we got to watch a spectacular sunset as it happened. We sold Jim's hash brownies for a dollar a piece. This guaranteed that by the end of the night, everyone would be on their backs. Racy, but the zeitgeist in Philly then was about raciness. As for the acts— Golden Ball played psychedelic space-rock. Many of the Golden Ball guys and the retinue they brought had been my friends in State College. I imported Lucky Dragons from the Lunge event in Northern Liberties; they were pure, laptop driven ambient. The demarcation separating Philly Free School from This Charming Lab happened fast; there were lots of paying customers at the door. Plus, Jim's presence assured that there was free hard liquor floating around. Jim O'Rourke did things right. If we were taking big risks, we also had some protection— the Highwire, not on the Gilbert Building's first floor, could only be accessed by stairs or elevator. D.P. Plunkett droned; Christopher walked around taking pictures with his digital camera; I was clean-shaven. Christopher, it must also be said, was never completely simpatico with the Free School events once they became successful. It was too much the case that he wanted to be the leader, rather than a wing-man. It's just that Villanova hadn't exactly prepared him for Center City the right way. Likewise, my time spent in Manhattan came in handy here, as a means of staying cool under pressure, as I'd had to do there. Cultural Manhattan does not tolerate gaucherie. You had to watch Christopher, because his instincts, including a streak of raw tactlessness, could be self-destructive. And John and I being debauched, and accepting conditions and terms from the Highwire which might be considered debauched ones, would've been a red flag to make Christopher turn and run, nose in the air, if the show had been his. So, Christopher submitted to John and I, but he was grouchy about it, even as I understood that Christopher contriving a winning cultural combo like this in Center City, without our help, was a long shot. The chunk of Christopher that was small, that had remained in South Jersey where he was raised, had to be dealt with. If the "factory room," unfortunately, remained untouched at first, the important thing was that when the square locked in, we really did work together, even Ricky. I knew instinctively that nothing like this had ever been done in Center City before. Turn the dials up to eleven, right? Interstellar Overdrive.

#29

Larsen Spurn reemerged at about this time. He had spent time in London with Station, but nothing had panned out for them there. Larsen's new incarnation was as front-man for an industrial-leaning band called ElektroWorx. Unlike Station, who were very raw, ElektroWorx were steeped in multi-media. Their performances incorporated videos and lighting effects. Thus, they were a natural choice for the Philly Free School. Larsen's life had retained a reckless quality; as of '04, he was living out of a recording studio at 13th and Carpenter. As I soon discovered, it was a junk-fest. Every time I smoked pot with Baptiste at the studio, it was dusted with H— I got flu symptoms instantly. There were always people drowsing on the couches scattered around the studio. This coincided with a period Larsen was going through of dating strippers. When Larsen signed on for a bunch of Free School engagements, it was the John Rind-Adam Fieled, West Coast influenced circuit he was working with. John and I could hang out at the studio and not feel out of place. Christopher never particularly liked the junk vibe and Ricky was adamant that only alcohol worked for him. Nevertheless, once Larsen was convinced that this wasn't This Charming Lab redux (Larsen had hated Bill Rosenblum and Dara March), he didn't hold any of his spoils back from us. I noticed things beginning to sink into a certain miasma— none of us were ever completely sober. The Philly Free School had a Manifest Destiny approach to debauchery— we prized altered states of consciousness. And all of us (including Larsen, with his European edge) were sublimely ignorant of how different we were than the rest of the Center City art scene. We had created a self-contained world.

#30

The debauchery edge of the Free School had some darkness and some light in it. What was always tinted more darkly for us was sexual tension and competition. We worked fiercely together, but there was ferocity between us too. As far as raw sex and how the square worked, it reduced to two basic circuits: John-Christopher and Ricky-Adam. John and Christopher were either would-be or "very much" bisexuals— they were sweet on each other, and on Ricky and I as well. They preferred the bisexual "sweetheart" approach. Ricky and I were straight-up, straight, and macho. We looked for girls. The problem Ricky and I had instantly is that we often wound up going for the same girls. Ricky, being Ricky, had to abuse the living shit out of me (both behind my back and to my face) whenever I won a battle. I wasn't big into subterfuge, but I was big on telling Ricky the truth: my slightly-less ferocious moves worked more frequently than his Genghis Khan ones. All this was destined to come to a head when Heather Mullen showed up. The unfortunate aspect of the situation— two male buddies want the same girl— was aggravated severely by Ricky looking for reasons to rock the P.F.S. boat, and courting pettiness in doing so. But that was to be several months in the future. For now, it meant that when the four of us went bar-hopping in Center City, the edge of unease between Ricky and I would start early and last until one of us "won." The comedic aspect which sometimes emerged— nights when we both lost equally— helped. Ricky wasn't completely incapable of laughing at himself, and I was used to vagaries I was used to. We were often shit-faced enough by the end of these nights that it didn't matter anyway. Nevertheless, the "sweetheart circuit" had a lot more finesse than we did. After the first half-hour, Ricky and Christopher would go out of their way to avoid each other. Worth noting, on this count, that Christopher being seven years older Ricky and ten years older than John (and two years older than me) added a level of discomfort to this part of the P.F.S. ride. Christopher had to be able to impose on the two of them his own sense of authority, cultural and otherwise, and of course John and Ricky rebelled instantly. They didn't care much about the body of work Christopher had created, it wasn't visible to them, so they just assumed equality, which Christopher did not accept. If only one of the movies could've been released…but life had been cruel to Christopher that way. He had little to show for his efforts. John could still find a queer wavelength to share with Christopher; Ricky could not. The seeming amity between them was all for show. Visually, we all knew the square worked— we became the center of attention wherever we went. As all the circuits worked except one, we could always branch off in ones, twos, or threes to flatter, seduce, or co-opt whoever we needed to. There was no precise system— we were selling good looks and youth. Philly in the mid-Aughts suffered no paucity of either.

#31

One thing the Free School needed to do was to chat up poets. We were doing multi-media; just musicians weren't enough. We learned very fast; if anyone among us was going to chat up poets, it would have to be me, or Christopher, or Christopher and me together. That's what the Adam-Christopher circuit was about, first and foremost: poetry. Christopher was very particular about his affiliations; he'd spent four years studying Pound (and the Modernists) alongside film at Villanova; it was always Pound who wound up being the major touchstone. Christopher enjoyed the goomba/pater familias level of Pound's image, which he identified with, and sought to emulate. If the four of us happened to be speaking with someone with serious literary pedigree, Ricky and John would soon wander off. Christopher and I were older (to reiterate, Christopher was two years older than me, and ten years older than John), and the necessary depth of historical knowledge was there with us. It meant that the major defunct circuit in the square (Christopher-Ricky) often hinged on Christopher telling Ricky off for not knowing enough about literature (and Ricky dismissing Christopher for being pompous). When all the parts were working together, the scientific objectivity of Ricky's mind allowed him to pick up things very fast (and oozing condescension the while); and John was always ready to learn. This, even if John and Ricky both favored novels. David Foster Wallace was a particular fetish of Ricky's, which I later followed up on. Christopher and I had a history of doing readings; we knew how to angle things, what to be fluent in, to get poets to read with us. Even if the poets other than Christopher and I who were associated with the Free School were taken more than slightly aback by how intensely we were living. It was difficult not to think of Rimbaud's "systematic derangement of the senses," and Christopher and I were both suckers for the French Symbolists, even if Christopher's tastes stopped before the English Romantics. Actually, it was difficult to discern at the time, but Christopher's rejection of Keats, Wordsworth, and the rest was a minor tragedy for me. Christopher and I could not stand bravely together as iconoclasts, which is what immersion in the Romantics would amount to for us. I was forced to stand alone, as a wilderness voice, for those who might want to hear it, announcing the richness of history in poetry as still relevant. Trish and Tobi were doing this for painting. And God knows, the killer irony was that Pound was as engaged with the Romantics as he was with anything or anyone else, and would've thought Christopher a heathen for not assimilating them. At the time, I gave a resigned wtf, and off we went. On some nights, it really was the Book Nerds vs. the Drinkers— God help Christopher and I for stopping at five drinks and debating what Pound did or did not help Eliot with (was he a constant shadow?); John and Ricky drank us two old fogies under the table every time.

#32

It has to be said that, all things considered, the big "getting things done" circuit in the Free School nexus was John-Adam. We were always "on," always ready to seduce, always working the angles with everyone and everything around us. Lots of subterranean action happened at B & N on Rittenhouse Square, where we worked (Ricky had started off with us, but had been "offed" for molesting female employees). Free School characters would drop in to say hello and commiserate. John and I would smoke a little pot on our lunch breaks (the streets around Delancey Place were conducive) and plan new heists. John had U of Arts kids he wanted to include; he had also become chummy with a gaggle of Temple undergrads who were into poetry. We were too on fire to create a context to be snobbish or elitist; anything young and fresh, with at least some artsy edge, had to work. The big sexual tension between John and I was more personal than my head-butts with Ricky— John was in love with me. He made passes; I deflected them. I was later to learn that many people who saw us on the street assumed we were a gay couple. One of the reasons we so liked to get high was so that John could numb the pain of unrequited love and I could numb the pain of having to deflect him. I was, and remain, incorrigibly straight. Still, these were dark undercurrents in a period charged with vitality and excitement. As a way-station leading to other destinations, B & N worked just fine for us.

#33

For the second Highwire show, Jim O'Rourke installed a nitrous tank in the stairwell behind the "factory room" and manned it. Whippets were sold for a dollar and almost everyone, including us, indulged. We were all in an exhilarated mood— it was now October, and attendance had doubled since the July show. We exhibited one of Trish's paintings, and she came with her sister. We were also able to show movies for the first time— our friend (and Trish's PAFA buddy) James Nguyen had two short ones, perfect for a venue and an event this size. Most importantly, the square worked cohesively (especially at keeping the money collection tasks in order, at Jim's behest), and no major balls were dropped between us. I learned about Ricky— when he had just the right kind of alcohol buzz going (we had loaded up on cases of wine for the event), he could be a sport. The best part of the night, for me in particular, was how effortless it all felt— the work of overseeing things (balloons in hand) was a pleasure for all of us. If there was a dark edge operative that night, it was that many artists were showing up who wanted to ride on the Free School gravy train, and not all of them had good or honorable intentions. John, in particular, would drink with anyone, and he was besieged with invitations. That John was incredibly charming was not in doubt; but those like myself watching, who cared about John, knew that beneath the charm was a sense of emptiness and inertia about his life which could be played upon. In all kinds of ways, including queer ways which I couldn't easily influence, John was ripe to be coerced. The therapist in him and the card-shark in him shared little common ground, and a gift for bonhomie was helping our shows but left desolate, pliant levels in him unconcealed. I struggled with my instinct to impose on John who he could and could not drink with, but not from a queer stance of complete understanding. It was for me to learn that when a queer and a straight are brothers, the queer will always feel misunderstood, no questions asked.

#34

By now, on the surface at least, all of us were infected by the freewheeling spirit of the Free School. We were bummed that Bush had won a second term; but there was nothing that could be done. One of John's many chance acquaintances had bequeathed to him a little acid blotter sheet. So, one night, when Christopher and Ricky happened to be unavailable (Christopher in particular, being based in Roxborough/Manayunk, was in and out of Center City), we decided to trip. We started at my pad at 21st and Race; the acid was slow-burn, and took about ninety minutes to sink in. We had been listening to the ambient music, including Steely Dan, the whole time; it passed in front of me as something concrete. We somehow managed to stagger over to the Last Drop, and found ourselves occupying the basement, which was dimly lit (as ever) and dank. Neither of us could sit still, and John was stuttering. I had a fortuitous inspiration— I was seeing another B & N girl named Jenny Lee, who lived around the corner on Lombard between 13th and Broad. We could drop in on her. She was a stoner, after all, and forbearing. We found her entertaining a bunch of her Delaware friends (she was a U of Delaware BFA), including a gorgeous brunette named Erin. At first, John was OK. But when we smoked a bunch of weed on top of the acid, John became catatonic. He was rocking back and forth in an armchair, and wouldn't respond to questions. The Delaware crew became aggravated by John's bad vibes, so I got him out of there. I related to the entire trip as droll, because I knew John wasn't seriously upset, just stoned. Knowing John, and that the Delaware crew were bizarre and not particularly on our wavelength, he might've enacted the whole stutter routine just to have an excuse to get out. Seinfeld for stoners. John could, indeed, be prankish, and the pranks almost always manifested to get him off an unfair hook somehow. C'mon, he might say, these are your friends, right, Adam? The trip would've been better with all four of us on it, but what the hell.

#35

One of the incidents which transpired at this time was symptomatic of Philadelphia's mixed reaction to the Free School. I asked a U of Penn staff poet to read with us at the Highwire. He demurred, and I shrugged; but Jim O'Rourke revealed that, having discovered the Highwire through us, he'd gone behind our backs and booked a huge academy affiliated poetry event there. He didn't ask any of us to read. Now, he wasn't breaking any laws, but it was a cheap move, and very not Free School. So, employing the privileged position we'd established as Highwire regulars (crucially, Jim O'Rourke didn't attempt to dissuade us), we decided to put in a unified appearance the night of the reading. It was just as boring, rigid, and academic as we had expected— the important part for us was that we stole the show. Not only was our antagonist made visibly uncomfortable by our appearance, all the academicians appeared uncomfortable that we were there. Even just our looks ran rings around them. As I was later to learn, many academicians have beleaguered fantasies of being stars themselves, and want to be perceived as celebrities. The "Fab Four" gave them a pungent dose of the real thing. It was enough to make me think that Jim O'Rourke, who had smoked us all up in the factory room beforehand, had the whole thing planned when he booked the academy reading.

#36

The Highwire Gallery, as it was used by us, was laid out funny. After taking the Gilbert Building's rather cramped elevator up to floor seven, step out and find yourself facing, rather bluntly, a wall with a wide window and a floor-supported heating fixture. Pop a U-turn around the visibly cable-supported elevator unit, past the entranceway to another gallery space, then into a long, winding hallway space, low-ceilinged and white walled, until you find yourself facing one left turn, into the main Highwire gallery space, or a straight ahead option, into a massive factory space which also managed to function for us as Highwire 2. Highwire 2 had some advantages over Highwire 1: perpetually dimly lit, this is where Jim O' Rourke was able to install his "dummy card," i.e. nitrous tank, on the nights he felt compelled to do so, and as we were not privileged to interfere with. Furthermore, a door towards the south-west corner of the room let onto an even more crepuscular stairwell. And this is where John Rind found me, on the single wildest night we ever had at the joint, with Avalon Zelensky's tongue forthrightly stuck, like a rebuke, down my throat. "Adam?" "Uh, hi John. What's up?" "Ry's here." "Do you need my help?" "Yup." "Alright, I'll be over in a minute." Avalon giggled as she put her shirt back on. "Sorry about this. You know where the wine is and everything?" "Yeah, we know." But what was in her voice was something else. She wanted more than I could give her then. "I'm sorry. I hope you'll forgive me." "Of course, Adam. Is Ry that teacher guy?" "Yup." Moonlight shone, as she leaned on the windowsill, on bangs that glistened redly even in the mostly darkness. She was ensconced at U of Arts, working towards choosing a major. Brass bolts through her nipples. Her mother a poet. "I think my Mom knows him." "I wouldn't be surprised. Kiss goodbye?" She kissed me, then bolted through the door fast enough that I lost sight of her instantly in the crowd. I, myself, swam anonymously through the crowd and manifested in Highwire 1, where John Rind was deep in conversation with Ry Mullen, the light-skinned African-American poet I'd met in Boston, who lived, most of the time, and slyly, in Philly. "Ry needs your help. He wants to read from somewhere weird." And Ry lead me to where he wanted to set up and read from, the usually unused north end of the room. We'd have to move several pieces of equipment. John was awkward with amps and PAs. "Alright, that's fine. Are you okay to read in about an hour?" "Sure. But the only way I can get the effect I want is to read from that end." "That's fine. I just need John here to clear a little space for us to move the gear in forty-five minutes." And so it was. Huge chunks of the Highwire 1 crowd were disappearing into Highwire 2 to get balloons. John and Ry were lost in a private space that was uniquely their own, so I left them alone. Until Christopher Severin unwittingly aggravated everyone by taking a picture of someone who did not want to have their head counted here. John and I were forced to descend on the scene of the crime, where Christopher told his unfazed, unmoved truth: "You don't come to an event like this if you want to remain anonymous. I will make you no promises, thank you very much." The little, bespectacled guy was threatening a lawsuit. "Don't worry, sir. We didn't mean to offend you. Just forget about it."

Christopher had to be bribed; we let him do his image montage shows in Highwire 2 during intervals, which we hadn't before. Ry appeared relieved, and was about to say something, but John whisked him away. By the end of the night, we'd all done so many whippets that we walked around sounding like Looney Tunes cartoons. Avalon was gone. Wtf. As for John and Ry, I wouldn't dare ask, nor what John tell me if I did. John: a fiercely private dude, when he needed to be. But that was the night when the synergistic energy between Highwire 1 and 2 reached a level of baroque floridity that everyone in the place, including Christopher, was where John and I were.

#37

My complete immersion in Center City, and the Center City cultural scene, often blinded me to a fact, not a cold, hard one but a stern one sometimes, that I really wasn't that far from Cheltenham, where I'd grown up. Difficult to notice, because for me living in Logan Square was like living on the moon compared to how I'd been situated in the 'burbs, or in State College, or Manhattan, which I'd found disappointingly drab. Suffice it to say, my dalliance with Emma Pasternak had not gone unnoticed among my Cheltenham classmates still in the area, which was more than half of them. Emma's elusiveness was well known, but then there was Diana Hunter, Emma's sister in all but name, who I saw then several times in West Philly when John and I had to be there. She didn't make any deliberate moves in my direction, but once, when I came back into Dahlak from taking a phone call, I found her chatting up John at the bar. "Oh, hi, Diana." "You know her?" "Yup." "Well, I've got to run. Here's my number, John." I sneered and giggled at the same time. "How do you know her? She seems friendly." "She's from Cheltenham. Another one doing the Trish Patrol." "Is that so?" I rolled my eyes, and we stepped into the yard when we saw who was waiting there. And I also thought it fair to John to never bring up Diana again. Whether or not he bothered to court her remains a mystery. Except to say that the Free School, for a number of reasons, including Emma and Diana, was instantly at least semi-legendary in Cheltenham. Not with Ted Gissman, however, who was riding the same media waves as his family before him had, out in Frisco. Ted evinced a distinct dislike of Trish, when I was heaviest with her, because he found the behaviors I described pointlessly disruptive. I had even been in touch with Ted in Frisco from Montreal, when Trish and I were there. Ted's mellowed-out West Coast emigree sensibility would've thought all of us by then were too nervy, too hyper, and Heather Mullen's Santa Cruz-to-South Philly own emigree journey would've seemed a painful inversion, to him. Still, the Ted voice I had grown up with was not completely silent then. N was silent enough that I only heard about her through a random selection of other Cheltenham folks. The stories were wild. She was touring America with a caravan of dirty hippies; was living on a commune in the south-west somewhere; had bribed her way into grad school to study psychology. What had actually happened to her at Skidmore was a mystery. I considered her lost. But the ferment from Cheltenham to the Highwire Gallery was there. Among the shadow-lurkers in Highwire 2, during the nights when we were allowed to inhabit it, I always saw a few Cheltenham faces. All of this added-up to mid-level plateau territory for me; a connection to my past which could point up or down at any moment. The big up moment— Emma— happened first. The rest were over or undertones which themselves were, as the saying goes, just around.

#38

Not all of the Highwire Free School shows were big ones. We would do series of modest shows between the larger shows. The Bats were an all-girl band we wanted to book, so we did. John and I did a bunch of schmooze routines with them, at Tritone and elsewhere, and John and I were both in love with Tobi Simon, an old friend of Trish's and mine who played keyboards (and also painted). Tobi was tiny, an elf, with exquisite bone-structure in her face, chestnut hair, and bright blue eyes. Of the Bats, she was the most natural as a Free School person. I would later ascertain that by this time, Tobi was living a day-to-day life not unlike Christopher's. The paintings she was producing, a median blend of French Neo-Classical influence picked up at PAFA and queer girl East Coast-ism, were so powerfully formal and thematically expressive at the same time that I became amazed she could leave her flat at all without barfing. The irony was that the Bats were not unsuccessful— they were in the Philly press semi-constantly, with Tobi prominently featured, cheekbones and all. The scenesters who knew her as a rock star had no idea she even painted. And while she wasn't just what I would call a bisexual tart, her intense, full-lipped, fine-featured magnetism was registered by all. By this time, we had a new system going at the Highwire, by which the factory room and the main space would be used simultaneously. The night the Bats played, we had poets reading on a raised dais in the factory room. The factory room had high ceilings, but was darker, danker, and more private than the main space— a perfect place to smoke up or hook up. The poets were Temple kids, and one stuck out for us immediately, especially to John; a buxom, olive-skinned Latino named Lena. If I sensed that I would beat John to Tobi, he would certainly beat me to Lena, who liked his looseness over my rigor. Christopher and I were attempting to perfect a new way of combining poetry with visual imagery; he projected images on a screen behind me as I read that night. Frankly, we were both bored with dry poetry readings (no matter how attractive the participants), and this was our way of extending their range. This was, as was admittedly another yawn for both of us, another layaway plan gambit— the idea that eventually other artists would show up, on the East Coast or wherever, and be influenced to try what we'd tried, to experiment in the ways that we were experimenting. Nobody in art can really condone the Layaway Plan patrol we're all intermittently part of, but it's a fact of cultural life. Deal with it. Headed towards 2005, John's characteristic looseness was the keynote mood. Even if it meant that Christopher and I had to up the ante to six drinks per night out.

#39

"Ingres and David," Tobi shouted in my ear, as I held onto her waist and we grinded on the dancefloor, upstairs at the Khyber. "Still them, huh?" "Of course. I still don't care what they say at PAFA, and I don't care what Trish says either." Tiny Tob— another brain complicated enough, like John's, to make your head spin, when up close and personal finally became a reality. She'd moved, as a painter, into a charmed space in which her kaleidoscope eyes fashioned, from street-life among the heavy dykes in Center City, a thematic compromise with the stern formality of the French Neo-Classicists. She managed to work me in as a little fun, on the side. Not that, standing on stage with The Bats, who were playing cat and mouse with the East Coast media at the time, her cherubic face didn't lead most Philadelphians to think she was just another rock girl. John loved her, too. The neighborhood where Tob had a flat and The Bats had a co-op house in the environs, South Street past Broad, into the mid-to-high Teens (Tob was on 16th), had become a dynasty situation for them. Not a neighborhood with a specific name, adjunct to center-of-the-center, but when lines formed to see them at Tritone, right in the heart of it, John and I knew our place as art geeks in comparison. Tob was a cheater! Once in a while, we got called in by The Bats heavy brass to do roadie duty. "By the way," I thought fair to mention to her, "I couldn't find those maracas at 8th Street Music at all. I don't think they have them." Tobi made a *moue* but also giggled, "Don't ask me, ask Liz." The song and the grind were about to end, but I knew Tobi would eventually be dispatched up to Logan Square for a few nights, and she was. John and I got paid back for our consummate skill lugging gear around with what amounted to, each time, about a joint worth of dope each. Fair. With us, Liz was happy to fire up the Bukka White and subject us to a rigmarole, two heavy dykes and two pretty bis, that had to do with demonstrating the right kind of devotion, so that The Bats at the Highwire Gallery could feel comfortable that they were not demeaning themselves there. It was useless at the house to talk to anyone but Liz. She'd look at you and make her appraisal for the evening: "Oh, it's you guys. Alright, you both wait here and I'll come back and show you where the gear is." Liz, with the red, lank mop, fulfilled her quotient of the redhead's notorious bloody-mindedness: "These two amps, set by the door for now. Don't touch the instruments 'til they're packed the right way. The keyboard, Tob is going to do for herself tonight." Might I say, with some embarrassment, that the portion of the dope we then received went right into our lungs. So that, gear lugged to a station wagon which only had to drive a yet-crucial few blocks, we all wound up at Tritone, to watch Tob and Liz go into Mick-and-Keith mode and leave John and I in the dust again. All in good fun. But the last thing I asked Tob on the Khyber upstairs dancefloor was to the point: "Are you gonna try to show this time?" Tob's eyes rolled up to the not particularly lofty ceiling, as the song began to fade and I relaxed my grasp on her waist. She collected herself, and said "Yeah. But I have to wait for all the other stuff to settle down. And no one's gonna rush me, either." I told John what she said, and he laughed all over again. This time, he wouldn't tell me why. The inscrutable bisexual brain: it is what it is.

#40

If there was never any particular gleam in Bill Rosenblum's eyes about us at the Highwire, it was for the simple reason that we'd inadvertently shanghaied the place away from him and his band. I'd given them a nice free ride in the early Aughts, but by the middle of the Aughts I knew I was onto something big and wanted to sell, and they didn't. Bill was a trooper, however, and was happy to man the board for us for shows we did with musical acts, for free dope and whatever other treats were around. It's just that Pete Lawson was a painter, and, as had been slow to emerge, Bill was a painter too. Semi-formalists, they both sought a happy medium between displays of technical prowess and a loose aesthetic which could find at least some place for abstraction. They both found Trish and Tob to be tight-asses, and, as was also slow to emerge, had a death-match attitude to the two ladies, going back a number of years. Turns out, Bill and Pete had a shady connection to a shared studio on the PAFA campus, where they really weren't supposed to paint, but did. Trish and Tob spent many nights in those days buzzing from studio to studio, checking out the competition, making connections, or just getting merrily wasted the right way. One night, Tob stumbled on Bill hard at work, and decided to drop in on him. He knew damn well who she was. She looked at the mostly finished canvas and said, "You can't leave half the canvas empty. Why don't you…" "No, that's alright. Thank you." Bill was peeved. Tob made a characteristic *moue* and said, "Alright, well, what are you doing here? Do you go to PAFA?" The answer, typical of Bill, involved more complications than he felt like discussing: "Yeah, sorta. I mean, I do, but…" "I know which class you need to take." At which point a number of other painters, all girls, shuffled in. "Listen guys, it's nice to meet you but I am working here. So." Tob sauntered out with the rest, but Bill was inflamed with animosity when he saw how technically grandiose she was. Yet even that wasn't really the problem. Tob and Trish were in a sorority of sorts, which operated from PAFA. In time, all of them knew Pete, too, who also wound up doing the head-on with all of them. The sorority was always making lists of guys they liked at PAFA, and it hung heavy in the air for Bill and Pete that they'd never be on those lists. Bill and Pete were, arguably, shady about painting, shady about PAFA, and Bill went out of his way in other parts of his life to obfuscate what he was doing. They always felt that Trish and Tob's sorority blocked them from showing in Philly. I didn't think Trish and Tob were that cloak and dagger— Bill and Pete did. As of us our Highwire residency, John and I began to learn of these things. No surprise that when, at one of the larger shows, we rolled out one of Trish's larger male nudes, Bill's eyes rolled skyward. "Don't put that anywhere near the board, please." Not hard to humor, but I managed to convey to Bill that he should feel free to express whatever he wanted (Trish not having arrived yet, and Bill's tutorial in my direction having begun). "I have nothing to say. Except to say that it's conservative the wrong way. I've said that about everything she's done from the beginning." Ok. Beneath whatever else Bill was hiding, I knew that Bill was jealous— Trish and Tob were more technically advanced than him— but I also knew that he hated

empty formalism backing up what for him were tired traditions. PAFA! It got even funnier when The Bats played at the Highwire, with Bill behind the board. Ha! Liz and Tob go around doing their everyone-under-our-thumb routine, but the buck (proudly) stops with Bill. Who was happy to tell Tob, "Um, we're gonna have to do a whole soundcheck, OK? I'm having problems with the PA. And it has to be soon, please." They did, it was fine, because Liz went with Bill. But Bill got weird and placed Tob higher in the mix than she usually was. He was right— she was the musical lynchpin holding The Bats together. And the spirit of the Free School dictated that, at the end of the day, we were all in the maelstrom together, and when it could be all for one, one for all, it should be, and pettiness was unacceptable. Bill's rebuke to Tob that night was implicit.

#41

The sixteen-year-old me, who sat in the movie theater in the bowels of The Beehive on Murray Avenue in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, watching Blue Velvet for the first time, had a limited repertoire of underworld experience. I'd smoked pot several times, which had started in the late winter of '92, that's about it. The down-and-dirty saga of Jeffrey Beaumont's immersion in the world of Frank Booth failed to hit that personal a chord. I related to the experience as novel. Just the way the kids at Carnegie Mellon that summer, all a year older than me, had a knowing approach to the vagaries of sex-and-drugs games, which I applied myself to with an admission of naivete. They all knew things I didn't know. All through the Aughts, it was that way for me and Larsen Spurn. No matter how many times we shared dope, chased girls together, or got up to other carousing games, Larsen, like John, was always just a little ahead of me. So, as the bottle of Stoli got passed to me, as I attempted to consolidate my position in a circle of half-naked boys and girls, who had assembled to celebrate Larsen's birthday, I had something to prove. Larsen gave me the cryptic look he always gave me at moments like this. It sailed to the left or right of affirmation, instead zeroing in on the idea of holding back anything personal, to see if I'd rise to the dare's occasion or not. What I drank directly from the bottle was maybe seven or eight vodka-shots at once. Larsen's laugh was equally cryptic. Did I pass the test? Was I the middleweight I thought myself to be? Autumn in South Philly— after fifteen minutes of complete euphoria, I felt so sick I had to descend down the steps of Larsen's studio, which doubled as a crash pad for him, and make the extremely blurry, and I do mean extremely blurry, trudge back to Logan Square. Larsen was in to do the Highwire Gallery— I'd passed the test. And Larsen failed to be condescending about the night later. Cards-to-the-chest. Caught in everyday snafus like the rest of humanity, Larsen was actually a pretty nice guy. It's just that those who knew him knew that there was a Frank Booth streak there, not a mile-wide one, but impossible not to notice. What does Larsen Spurn actually do? Hard to tell. The way he chose to be attired— fetish/boutique, with distinct overtones of New Romantic, Duran Duran moxie around the edges— and his itinerant habits, were all their own dare to figure out someone who knows, as gospel, how to mystify. Larsen might be any way at any time. He's another one who compelled John and I to do a roadie routine for him. The show itself was fine— he wound up doing several shows with us, with his electronic ensemble, who also did dissonant while letting in The Fixx. It's just that John Rind never really recovered from the emergence of the Loch Ness monster, Larsen's Frank Booth streak, before the show. "You guys are such bums, you know that? Every time we have you show, you wait 'til the last fucking minute to do everything. Now you, George, put down that fucking J and pack the fucking cases, alright? How far do I have to go to get you guys to act like fucking professionals?" He looked at John and I. "Don't just stand there, please. Find what needs to be packed up, including the video equipment, and just do it, and don't act like a couple of fucking amateurs." I was used to Larsen throwing in the occasional Booth-ish tirade (I even

heard him say once, in a situation that made me laugh, "Just pour the fucking beer, man"), John thought he was too harsh. John also disliked that Larsen, whose looks were Simon le Bon level, went so far out of his way to mystify whether he was queer or not that (as he calculated, and as was not true of me) queers would always follow him. "We're leaving now." To us, "Go get in the van and wait." A few more pills, a quick shot of something, and Larsen was ready to leave too. The shows with Larsen at the Highwire went off without a hitch. Larsen at the Highwire was fine, Frank Booth forgotten. It's just that no one in the Free School ever really got comfortable with him except me. I liked the way he always got me in trouble. It was the right time to get pushed, repeatedly, over the cliff.

#42

Competition, folks. It lurks there as a demon between males of the species, doing a sourpuss number on camaraderie and true brotherhood, making a mockery of ties which could bind with more authority, beleaguering situations which shouldn't matter. "Bros before hos," Larsen used to say, who was no misogynist but often stumbled around semantics. To be fair, Larsen's girls were hardly hos, as the saying goes. They tended to share many of his stripes, as Trish Webber shared stripes with me— fetish/boutique stalwarts, underworld slants, heavy tempers, club-and-pub mentalities. It's just that many of them were also gorgeous and, as I couldn't not notice, and as began at the turn of the century, none of them had eyes for me at all. I wound up looking like a Larsen-flunky around them. Club-and-pub meant they often wouldn't even look me in the face— they didn't need to. So when I found myself, for example, sitting half-naked on the shag-rug in South Philly, looking at Anastasia, a stunning brunette from New Jersey who was famous for starting trouble with guys, in her bra and panties, it was with the exasperated sense of the usual wheel turning— not only no eyes for me, but also no sense that she could even directly look me in the face. But, to shade the painting diligently, with some respect to precision, it must be said that by late '04 I had a sense of revenge going. It had transpired, in the spring of '03, that I brought Trish Webber and Tobi Simon to Larsen's studio for a visit. My ostensible reason was to see if I could match Tobi with Larsen. Trish and I were steady at the time. What happened was cacophonous— we all smoked a bunch of weed, some of it my plain jane stuff, some of it Larsen's H-laced, cough-and-flu treasure trove. Tobi didn't think much of Larsen, and vice versa. But, when we were all high as kites, I saw Larsen lock into Trish in a manner that expressed total enchantment. Trish's long limbs, wide hips, and equally long, lank blonde mane could only be enticing to a Philly guy also entangled deeply with Europe, as Larsen was, who could be, in a number of different sectors, continental at any moment. Larsen locked into Trish, and began to flirt with her. Heavily. "Bros before hos," huh? At first, I was amused. The level that this was Aughts Philly was a self-conscious one, which meant it would've been uncool to try and stop what was developing. At first. High as kites though all of us were, I started to understand that, willy-nilly, Larsen meant business. He really was going to try to fuck Trish right in front of me. Alright. So, gathering my wits, I made my apologies to Larsen and dragged the two ladies down the steps, and out again into the warm spring day. Larsen, on the negative side of things, had taken things too far that day. On the other side of things, I had him— a righteous cock-block of a dude whose girls were constantly cock-blocking me. It never moved, after that— Larsen had a hard-on for Trish Webber that, to his credit, he never really tried to hide. Even if South and West Philly weren't working together well then. When I broke up with Trish the first time in late '03, it was that South-to-West imbroglio which made it so that, as shocked me, Larsen made no move in her direction. And, I might add, continued to pine. Trish never denied there was an attraction there, but it was minor for her. Trish had a continental sensibility too, but

wouldn't have liked that Larsen's self-presentation could be construed as Eurotrash. Then, the camera deadlocks everything, and pans back to Anastasia, stripped to her undies in late '04, looking (I felt) at everything but me. This is where it remained, because Trish's big '06-'07 comeback did a predictable trick of irritating an old wound for Larsen. Yet, in the main, "bros before hos" did manage to rule the roost, and made it so that there was no extended alienation between Larsen and I. The way there was, actually, destined to be extended alienation between myself and Ricky Flint, for what he would always say were a bunch of calculated gambits when Heather Mullen showed up.

#43

"Is Adam Foley around, please?" It was Bill Rosenblum, sounding pissed off, as was not unusual during the mid-Aughts. He circled the island space in the middle of Highwire 1, red wine in hand, and I caught up with him. "Look, someone has to tell Larsen to move his shit, OK? He set up one of his projectors precisely where I need to put the board tonight. I'm no good at dealing with him, so if you take care of it now, we'll all have a better ride." OK. Larsen was doing a moderate-volume sound-check. "Larsen, can I talk to you for a minute?" "Yeah, fast, though. What's up?" "Bill needs you to move the projector near the wall, because he wants the board set up there tonight. Is that OK?" Larsen frowned. He hated losing to Bill on any level. "Yeah, fine. Let me finish the sound-check first." He went back to his keyboard. "Well, OK, but if he let me set up the board now, he could sound-check with the fucking board, right?" Classic, and symptomatic of the fact that even in the City of Brotherly Love, not all guys are destined to become brothers. The key to the animosity between Bill Rosenblum and Larsen Spurn was that each had several things the other wanted. When Larsen Spurn entered a room, he was a commanding presence. Tall, graceful, semi-extreme good looks, and, to top it off, the right kind of swashbuckling buccaneer attitude to convey that he could out-drink, out-smoke, and out-snort anyone he damn well pleased. Bill had a more modest repertoire on that level, and no one could call him a posturing maniac. He wasn't a babe magnet. Yet, when Bill began being on the up and up in the early Aughts around studio work, studio wonk work, as it were, the catch-fire was rapid. Bill was in demand as a paid producer and a paid engineer. Larsen was competent in the studio— no one could say he wasn't— but he didn't generate sparks when he attempted to do his own studio wonk routine. What happened in Larsen's studio was ad hoc. Moreover, knowing the situation, Larsen was too proud to ask Bill for advice. Bill also had a knack for finding real pads to live in, rather than doing the itinerant routine which was Larsen's bane. In fact, as of the night in question, Bill was in the process of moving his studio, and all his possessions, from Webster Street in South Philly way up to 52nd and Cedar, one of the great Center City DMZs. His package deal was, in some ways, a more together one. Not that, as made Bill extremely grumpy, Larsen didn't get, constantly, better dope. The designer stuff, delivered to wherever he was. Bill settled for the same plain jane deals I had. I spent years being a go-between for the two, whenever we were thrown in together. I was able to be buds with both of them, for different reasons. Average height, reasonable good looks, I could keep up with Larsen as a commanding presence. Lots of life force energy, solid resilience, I was put together in a way that made me, in a way many found surprising, a good carousing partner for Larsen. I could jump off a cliff at a moment's notice, as he required. I didn't mind getting dosed much, either. Or almost dying. An adventure's an adventure, man. Bill and I were more about work. Whether we were dealing with my songs or my books, my studio adventure with Bill was about sound, the human voice, resonance, where the magic is in recording all these things and how to capture it. It was no small thing to me that Bill was a

head about books and literature, too. Once I realized he was a secret painter, the conversations we had got even more florid (as did what he was willing to say, willy-nilly, about Trish and Tob). Bill was all over the place, but it did not go unnoticed by him that almost everyone in our circle had some connection to the sublime somewhere. Larsen was many things: was he sublime? But, now, here we were, and Electroworx would sound-check without the board, thank you very much. Once Bill got the board in place, he sidled up to me, after refilling is cup, and said, "Sorry I snapped, guy. But now I can see what I need to see to keep the whole thing balanced. Whiskey, too? Jesus." John Rind piped up, "Don't hog it, Bill. The Temple kids are giving me something to drink about." Larsen, also bemused at their precocious insistence to do a sound-check for a poetry reading, offered to fake man the board. Next.

#44

At this time, John and I established an ancillary beat to the beat we were doing in Philly. Who's to say that, given the proper venue, Philly Free School couldn't conquer Manhattan? John's sister Kyra lived on the Lower East Side. She was a burgeoning fashionista. Kyra looked like a female John; long, curly dark hair, dark eyes, slightly olive skin. To John's dismay, we clicked immediately. I was aggressive in those days, and Kyra and I flirted aggressively. Meanwhile, I was looking up my NYC contacts from the Nineties. The big hook-up was Samantha Fry, a singer-songwriter I met at the Sidewalk Café then doing anti-folk and who was still my friend. I was also in touch with Jeff Kim Chung, a Swarthmore grad I had worked with at B & N who was now doing a fiction MFA at Columbia. With Kyra's fashion contacts, we had the rudiments of an NYC Free School circle in place. The big venue target seemed to be the Bowery Poetry Club. Every time we went to NYC, John and I stopped in there to chat up the staff. We eventually got the e-mail of the guy who ran the place. He was slow to respond. And while we tried to get Ricky and Christopher in on the NYC shenanigans, it was clear that the problem was housing. Kyra could fit John and I comfortably in her little studio; but all four of us would have been absurd. I was hoping to court both Samantha and Kyra. John and I were still doing our pot n' books routing at B & N in Philly, and the whole Free School adventure became like living in a haze. If there was a rock beneath us at this point, it was Jim O'Rourke. We still, all of us, had the Highwire like a fist, and that was still where we had the most fun.

#45

The next time John and I hit NYC, we went with Kyra to see Samantha play solo at a club on Ludlow Street. I spent the night flirting with both of them. At one point, we were all sitting on a couch, and I had one on either side of me. We must've looked outrageous. Samantha lived far away in Brooklyn, whereas Kyra was only a few blocks away. Plus, John and I had a bunch of things to do the next day. So, I decided to stick around. Oddly enough, I never got another chance to hook up with Samantha. Kyra and I were hot and heavy all over each other. John, in the next room by the end of the night, just had to take it and go to sleep. I knew I was being cruel, but my blood mastered me then. The next day, the three of us went to see John Ashbery read in the West Village. We also stopped in to see our contacts at BPC, and it looked like we were finally going to get a date. John was only slightly more moody than usual. As for Kyra, I could tell that the night before hadn't been a big deal for her. I had it in me to be smooth about moving on too. John and I slept on the Chinatown bus back to Philly. Because John and I were both decent raconteurs, I guessed that the story about Kyra and I would do the rounds very fast. During a promiscuous era in Center City, I knew that the recounted drama would be all to the good. I could also sense in the air that some kind of drama would come to a head between Ricky and I.

#46

In the bars and the clubs, artistic types were beginning to migrate towards the Free School crew when we went out together. We didn't always have to search aggressively, or to be "on" anymore. I don't recall how we came to meet Heather Mullen. The first memory I have of Heather is of her sitting with us for some reason at McGlinchey's. Perhaps we met her there. She was tallish, about 5'7, handsome rather than pretty, in a thick-browed, Frida Kahlo-ish way, brunette waves covering a high, well-shaped forehead, big bones forced to hold only a little extra. The way she moved, her physiology, managed both to convey and impose a direct and uncompromising sense of straight sexuality. This, even as her looks were divisive— Christopher and John, for instance, found her appearance repellent. I fell pretty hard for her, but kept it to myself. And while Heather wasn't a loud mouth, she made very plain that if you wanted her in on something, her opinion, her voice had to command respect. She was used to social contexts in which she could lay down laws, from California (where she started) on out. Just as Trish took N out to the Nth, Heather was an uber-Josie. A siren-oracle. She was writing novels. She and Ricky were combustible. But the knife-edge current in the air, even on this first night, was that she wanted me too. I hung back, and let Ricky win, which was painful but (I felt) necessary. Ricky and Heather became an item almost instantly. In a way, Ricky was a more apropos target for Heather— they were both authentically self-destructive. They were also, I was later to find, derisive about me behind my back. We arranged a reading specifically for the five of us at Molly's Books in South Philly. Oddly, Heather's heart-on-the-sleeve prose aligned her more with John Rind than with Ricky, who tended to ape the loopy surrealism of Foster Wallace and the McSweeney's crew who were big then. It's important to realize— neither John nor Ricky ever really committed themselves to being artists. That was Christopher and I. Heather used writing to express where she stood as a politico in the world. Form was not her bag. Her writing was a means to a political end. It meant that, in some ways, Christopher and I were safe with each other is a way that we couldn't be safe with the others. You wouldn't want to call them impostors, but no one would valorize them for having the nerve to create anything that special either. If Christopher couldn't use them as proteges or acolytes, he often kept to himself a sense of boredom (which I spotted) with their antics. Heather he found dull for the tangent reasons I've already mentioned. Agit-prop writing tends to fail when it's presented alone. I was more baffled by my intense attraction to Heather, who I saw through rose colored lenses at the time. One reason I had brought Sara Blount back into the fold was for her to meet Ricky— they were firing off on similar literary cylinders. Somehow, the meeting never came off— Sara was a delicate bird, easily frightened away. But Heather stuck. And as she and Ricky were soon living together, and as she was dragging all her social contacts (some artists, some young politico types) to Free School shows, the whole Free School experience was deepening and darkening into something more personal, more "felt," then it had been before.

#47

Ricky and Heather were moody for me to have to watch. Ricky's knife-edge disposition often took him and his drinking nights over a cliff that John and I were loathe to follow. If he really did stumble into and out of gutters, we didn't want to know. One spring night, while cold weather held, I found myself drinking at McGlinchey's as usual with the Free School crew. Ricky and Heather were particularly piquant that night about making plans. They would tour the U.S.A. as a literary dynamic duo, leave us in the dust. I fell into a funk. It all comes down to Trish, I thought. I don't know why, with the whole fucking scene and the whole fucking city going crazy, she had to disappear. I found myself toasting Trish Webber to myself, again and again: Jack and Coke, vodka cran. The song, a conventional one for the Glinch, barnstorming through powerful speakers, spoke for me as completely as it could: *I been holdin' out so long, I been sleepin' all alone, Lord I miss you*. It was true, even with all the action, all the buccaneering, plenty of long nights mixed in there: *Ooh, baby why you wait so long…come home! Come home!* I had no roots, no center, and it's not like Trish owed it to me to anchor me in the world. I didn't say that. It's just that a helluva time had descended on all of us where too much was happening, too fast. I couldn't understand what she was doing in East Falls with that retarded French guy, and I knew that when we broke up in '03 it was my idea and my fault, but goddamned, all the craziness was making me eat some serious shit. The shit was just loneliness, the strung out sense that after the carousing was done I usually went home to nothing. *People think I'm crazy…whatsa matter with you boy*? At a certain point in the night's festivities, I became dimly aware that Ricky and Heather weren't even there anymore (oh, thanks a lot, guys), and spotted John at the other end of the bar, doing the side business he was always doing. Him being there made it OK for me to stay. With John back in the booth a few minutes later, I began to come back to myself, and who he had dragged in, cat-like, didn't bother me that night. I participated in the conversation to the best of my abilities. Another half-hour, moving towards closing time, and I spotted someone interesting in another booth across the bar area. She was a petite brunette, with a waterfall of semi-tawny hair down her back, in jeans and a yet-tasteful midriff shirt. She was show biz. I turned to John, who was taking dictation from one of his friends in a small notebook with a black-ink pen as usual, and said, "Hey John…look. Isn't that Jade Racino, the actress?" John squinted, hunched and squirmed to get a better viewpoint, and giggled. "Uh, yeah, I think it is. Do you know her?" "No, I just wanted to make sure it was her. Thanks." Alas! Ten more minutes, and she and her group were gone with the wind. But we had done the stare game; she had given me the once-over, and vice-versa; so, that would have to be my buzz for the night. The real buzz was something in my guts that told me that she was for real, and would come back to haunt me one day the right way. When I woke up the next morning, John had already sent me an e-mail: *So, before we move to Los Angeles, let me say for the record that I have notated already who among us gets to do what to whom. You will lose with the brunettes, as usual. Don't say I didn't warn you. Best, John.*

#48

When the square was initiated, the only circuit which didn't function properly was Christopher-Ricky. Over the course of a year, more tension developed as the John-Ricky circuit became more active. When The Drinkers drank, they liked to take the piss just generally; because Christopher could be awkward, and his social mannerisms were so unique, he was easy pickins' for The Drinkers in general. Ricky was constantly goading John to be harder and more callous; John wanted desperately to be impressive to Ricky, and idealized him as a big brother figure; both The Book Nerds bore the brunt of their chemistry, but Christopher in particular got victimized. Predictably, Ricky lorded his relationship with Heather over us, and it stimulated him to greater displays of rambunctiousness. Ricky wanted to invert things; to place himself at the top. My strategy against him was to keep working my circuit with John on a day-to-day basis, so that we could work without Ricky getting in the way. At this point, we worked towards another big Highwire show, with Larsen and his band (ElektroWorx). We even had a place for one of Larsen's DJ friends. By the time the show happened, Jim O'Rourke was there with a nitrous tank again. This time, throngs of teenagers from the suburbs showed up. Jim wisely hid the nitrous tank, as the Highwire momentarily went "rave."

#49

Right off Rittenhouse Square on Delancey Place, the Rosenbach Museum, a small, compacted edifice in simple brick, offered manuscripts from famous writers, going back centuries. One of the Rosenbach's prize jewels was several original James Joyce drafts, composed during the composition of Ulysses. The Rosenbach initiated a unique Philadelphia tradition— that June 16, "Bloomsday," the day on which the famous Mod-classic novel takes place (June 16, 1904, to be precise) be declared a holiday, with Delancey Place filled to the rafters to hear notable readers read from the book. And so that the assembled throng could knock a few back, too. Hello, Dublin. So it was, that on June 16, 2005, I stood in the throng as usual, but as moody as a would-be Stephen Dedalus could be. Tonight with Heather Mullen was clearly make or break. She looked fine. *Her crocus dress she wore, lowcut, belongings on show.* Indeed, it couldn't not be moody for me that Heather Mullen always put her belongings on show. Molly Bloom that she was, who didn't sing but write, and wildly, as she appeared to live her life. But what did I know? I had been smitten with her instantly. *A liquid of womb of woman eyeball gazed under a fence of lashes, calmly, hearing.* Right, right, but could she hear me? Dimly aware that my susceptible emotions linked me rather more securely to Leopold Bloom himself than to Stephen Dedalus, I wandered away from the throng, who cheered what they only semi-understood, into the claustrophobia of hours to kill before Heather. I could walk all the way down to Penn's Landing and back. I could do a coffeeshop patrol. Or, I could do a homing bird routine back to Logan Square, which is what Leopold would have done, and what I did. The hours of torment slowly passed. Apropos, I thought, that Molly and I should find ourselves ensconced at a pub, a walk-down from 18th Street, where show biz big wigs liked to hang out, too. Bar Noir: was it what it said it was? Well, the intense late afternoon sun, as it caressed the 18th Street facades, we could only see as an echo. In the prematurely crepuscular gloom, we got through, with some stealth, the timid business of being alone together for the first time. Ricky was not pinned to her lapel, as I hoped he would not be. Heather was the kind of Molly whose wildness belied not a slick stage presentation, but political plans. She talked in broad strokes about groups of people, factions, organizations, conglomerate interests, parties. Yet her Molly-ism, after a few drinks, betrayed happiness to walk back with me to Logan Square. The contradictions she was carrying, I found lovable. All in her that was physical— the tallness above average, big bones which carried just a little extra, brown-into-tawny hair riding her head in lank waves, heavy-brows, and features which could be construed as plain or striking, as you wish— was owned and embraced with complete authority. Abstraction into groups and factions did not disturb that. All of which made her a uniquely potent female entity. Molly, but unprotected by any Leopold, and free to roam, copulate, and conspire as she wished, in a landscape she navigated from a center attuned to myriad realities, in myriad ways. John, oddly enough, and Christopher, hated her. They were both really Stephen— they didn't have the husbandly tenderness I did for Trish, and Heather. And they both showed up later at the Rosenbach

than I did, John later revealed, and managed to steal a bottle of white wine from inside the museum. Stephen would've liked that.

#50

"Tell me a story…" is what Debbie Blantz chose, quizzically, to open with, after I handed her the cell phone. Larsen Spurn, ensconced in South Philly, was on the other end. It was the middle of the night; maybe 2 am; and a bunch of us were lying, stoned, in an open field directly behind the Contoocook in Henniker. I worked, as always when stoned, on intuition and hunches, and I had a hunch that Larsen would answer his phone. So, Deb decided, still wet from rope-swinging into the river in her bra and panties, and perhaps on a whim, to ditch her customary Brahmin façade and slug Philly in the guts. It was a gutsy time to be there. The confluence of circumstances which brought the poets to Henniker, eighty miles outside Boston (still, arguably, hanging in as a Boston 'burb, as Henniker, New Hampshire was), was not important to anyone then. We all had blood-and-guts work to take care of. Whoever Wendy Smith thought she was by then, I had my own, semi-heart of darkness version of her, because I knew she would end up famous, and because I wanted us to have a real night together. A few nights later, we were all lounging with drinks in a large living room space, in one of the dormitories we were allowed to use, and I invited her into my room, down the hall, for a smoke. Nothing happened at first— but a wind current somehow slammed the door shut, and the rest, as they say, was history. Even as what happened failed to advance her Virginia family's Boston interests substantially. I always tried to get her to stick to the poems, stick to the poems. Sometimes, I succeeded. This action was all relayed to John Rind *muy rapidamente*. He, it would seem, cared more about the action in Philly, but he was planning a surprise for me. So, the penultimate night of the retreat, I was stunned to see Larsen's silver Toyota Corolla roll into my temporary parking lot, carrying John Rind and Christopher Severin. John emerged from the front seat, not having driven and thus unsurprisingly drunk, with a bottle of Stoli. "Jesus Christ, guys. Nice Corolla, Larsen. Jesus." "Well, you sounded like you were having so much fun, we thought we'd join you." Christopher couldn't resist adding, "I've got the camera and I'm ready for action. Where are the suspects?" I laughed, because Wendy, I knew, would hide from a camera. Debbie, who I enjoyed just being buddies with, was more promising. "Wait here, guys. Let me see who I can round up." Sure enough, Debbie and the whole Jon Arnold crew, were hanging out on an adjacent porch. They gave me the usual quizzical stare and I said, "Some of my friends are here from Philly, guys. We can move you past all that white wine-n-wine cooler crap and into the vodka zone. You in?" Debbie ran her hands through her blonde mane and the soprano sing-song emerged, "Is this the guy I was talking to the other night on the phone?" "Yeah, Larsen, and two other guys." "I'll go. Do you guys want to come?" "Uh…we will." So, the party of five we were, Debbie and I and three pick-ups I only vaguely knew, ambled back to the lot and the Stoli. I was stunned to see Wendy Smith already there. "I met your friends here, Adam. They seem to have more vodka on their hands than you do. John here's been mighty friendly." She took a neat, not insubstantial pull of the stuff. Eventually, John, Christopher, and Wendy formed a group to do something obscure— an indoors place in

walking distance she thought good fodder for pictures. Oddly, as I couldn't have called, it was Christopher and her who seemed to click most. Unfortunately, there went our vodka. "Guys, let's go to Daniel's, alright?" Larsen was accosted by Debbie, "And you, buster, have a lot of 'fessing up to do. I think I know your story, indeed." Things were blurry; we found ourselves seated outside at Daniel's, and I suddenly remembered that these three weirdos would have to sleep somewhere tonight. "So, y'all can crash in my room, right?" "Yeah. That's what we thought." Debbie chirped, "Won't they be knocking Wendy out of place?" "No, Deb. That's over. I mean, it's not over, but we're not getting married." Gleeful at my drunkenness, Deb rejoindered, "Thanks, Adam. I can see you're thinking carefully about what you're doing, as usual." Oh what a night, as the song goes. And it did with the three goons crashing on my floor. Christopher got some shots he didn't expect to get; John found enough action to clean off most of the Stoli; and Larsen met Jon Arnold and made instant business venture plans to connect Henniker and South Philly. When they left the next day, I understood that my life had developed an intense, headlong sense of momentum, and that for the time being, I was just along for the ride. Silver Corolla or not…

#51

Before he left with the others the next day, Larsen and I took a ride over to the Concord Walmart again, so I could buy another plaid lumberjack sweater-jacket. As we got into the Corolla, Larsen said he wanted to hear more about Wendy Smith. He cackled. I mentioned that, if she ever came to Philly, there were clubs I wanted to take her to, along with the Highwire Gallery. He cackled again. And proceeded to lay down the law about some differences between the United States and Europe: "You have to understand that girls like Wendy Smith don't go clubbing in London, for example, or Belgium. You can't really break out of where you came from. What they do in the States, they don't do there. Mix it up. David Dulworth and I used to try to get posh girls to the clubs, because in certain parts of London they'll at least listen to you. No dice. Belgium's no different." So if Wendy and I started from London, let's say…more cackling. "Well, yeah, you start from the middle class, so there's at least some kind of game there. I wound up in Philly because I don't fit in anywhere in London the right way, anyway. Belgian working-class, but travels the world constantly, musician, smart enough to hold my own with brains, knows how to dress, good driver…that's Nowheresville in the UK. The problem is, as limited as the class thing is where they enforce it in Europe, which is most of it, the people are just more sophisticated than they are here. They come from countries with longer histories, and they grow up absorbing more history, too. They're more formed. They know themselves better. America is still wilderness that way. The real history hasn't happened yet. So it makes sense that people like us are allowed to run around and try and be creative. America has to start somewhere." The Walmart was Walmart, but Larsen pointed out, "This store doesn't really target any class. Some things are expensive, some are cheap. In Belgium, stores only have either all cheap or all posh gear." Then, there was what Larsen really wanted to know: did it actually happen? I was pleased to say that it did, even as Larsen bothered to opine, "And yet, you'll never get it out of her twice. Everyone around her's gonna be completely scandalized. You're U Penn, so I guess it's alright. But you'd never guess that in Maida Vale, you'd never get a peck on the fucking cheek. Remember, that whole clan are rich without being sophisticated. They'd never guess that Wendy shacking up with you might be a good idea for her career as an artist, for example. You said you tend to out-publish her, right? But they act like little kids. Which they do in Maida Vale too, but are cleaner about it, which is why in Maida Vale you couldn't even kiss her. Londoners are good at staying clean that way. Americans don't know who they are yet, so they get confused fast." I tried not to be defensive: I thought I was plenty posh. Even as the lumberjack sweater-jacket I had duly donned might've suggested otherwise. Larsen took me aside for a final cigarette before they departed: " One last thing about Wendy, Mr. Foley. You'd be well advised to understand that what you get out of her now is not too much. She really went out on a limb to do what you did with her, but I see now very clearly who the Smiths are. They'll be happy to tell Wendy not to repeat the mistake." Watching the Corolla pull out of the parking lot, and

Christopher cryptically open his passenger seat window to take a final shot of something, I inwardly rebelled. I wanted to think that Larsen was being reductive. But I checked, and there it was: Wendy, who had been just visiting anyway, was gone with the wind.

Lena, the Temple student who had read with us more than once, was on the scene quite a bit then. She and John were very tender with each other, and Ricky liked to play up the "double date" angle and bring Heather in on the action. I wasn't seeing anyone steadily, and detested feeling like a fifth wheel. When this formation emerged, I would leave. It's just that Heather was a sugar-cube underneath, and we had a little secret pact going, and knew it. By Bloomsday '05 (June 16), we had entered into a full-on, passionate affair, and Ricky was out. Ouch. All the while, John and I had picked up the cudgel to put together a huge poetry reading at the Khyber, patterned after the Poetry Incarnation reading in '65 Swinging London. It wasn't an entirely joyless enterprise, but without Christopher and Ricky there was little group espirit de corps. Now we just felt like ordinary hustlers; even if, for the first time, the Philly press were showing some interest in us. We hammed the event up verbosely for them. As it were, and when it was all said and done, spending two perfect nights with Heather Mullen wound up being the apogee of the mid-Aughts ride for me. We managed to encapsulate, in a tiny time-frame, a real marriage; we found a way to give each other everything we had. By the time she took the stage at the Khyber Pass, swaying slightly from a hot ninety minutes spent at the Khyber bar, she had also managed to demarcate what had happened in June, and what was going to happen now. I'd been to Boston and back, and found a way, without meaning to, to cheat. Heather knew by then who Wendy Smith was. Heather clung that night to Sal Benzon, a Philly politico who liked to hang around cultural people. Yet this was the night that, for the Philly Free School, for pure public *razmatazz,* established a real standard, and won a real game. A paying crowd poured in, and filled the place up. We had received real hype in the press. Heather's plea was similar to my opening remarks. She compelled to assembled throng to understand, "We live in a new Philadelphia. All the boundary-lines are gone. Who you are now is who you can be in this living painting, this new assemblage." Heather looked down briefly, futzed with the mike, and piped up, from a higher vocal register, "It's time for everyone to come together in a way that what you get back is always more than what you give up. You think you've seen what Philadelphia can be, but you haven't. I want every single one of you to understand something about Philadelphia: we started this country, and we're all gonna start it over again right now, in a spirit of compromise, in a spirit of no resistance. I know how hard everyone here is working, alright? Respect. But who The Philly Free School are and who you are, are the same thing. We're all here tonight because America needs Philadelphia to take the lead again. Amen!" I won't exaggerate: not everyone cheered. But there was enough fire in the response to inspire John Rind, for one, to give Heather a big bearhug (for once) when her screed ended a few minutes later. Once again, Heather Mullen became the hub and the apogee of our enterprise, even for John, even for her newly established ex-husband. Heather was better than John and I with the public, in a way: she had political instincts. Even if, despite Heather's rabble-rousing, the Khyber proved less levitational than the Highwire, stuck as it was on street-level, and in one low-ceilinged room. No one was happy, for example, to see the Plunkett

goons sulk dejectedly at the bar. They later insisted that I had stolen their money. In a way, John, Heather, and I, and the rest, were thieves in the night, laying down a cultural gauntlet hewn of unusually genuine materials, and living on a real edge in an unforced way. Our moment there, that night, was a mid-level one, strength-wise: not too fragile, not too sturdy either. But I'll always love Ms. Mullen in retrospect for daring us to imagine more strength in us than we actually had then. What she imagined then, I am attempting to make a tactile reality now. Amen! The darkest cloud on the horizon for me, personally, was D.P. Plunkett and his crew. The Free School had found ways to upstage them, but we were weakening. The Plunkett poets read at Poetry Incarnation '05 with many others; but they were morose at the event because we didn't treat them like stars. They reacted by concocting the aforementioned, spurious tale that I had withheld money from them and began to circulate it after the event. If I wanted to survive, I knew I'd have to stop dissipating my energies and focus on poetry in a singular way. There was no other way to conquer the Plunkett goons; and I'd learned that art events are all too ephemeral. There was little in them left to keep. I had one major piece out in Jacket Magazine; it was time to build on it. And ponder Heather.

#53

The map of John Rind's brain: as I've said, complicated. As I got to know John, I sifted through the history he gave me. If I couldn't figure him out completely, I could at least give it the old college try. Raised, with Kyra and Ari, in an itinerant way, by a card-shark father and a therapist mother. At a certain point, the Rinds were settled in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, right outside State College. They were there, it turns out, part of the time I was in State College, too. John never forgot seeing me around with Jena Strayner, while that was going on. The Rind kids received little conventional schooling. What they did receive was a thorough grounding in the rigors of psychology, psychoanalysis, and the therapeutic process. That was on one side. But the other side, which was also internalized, encompassed casino rackets, betting circles, fantasy sports hi-jinx, and what it meant to keep lines running in all directions. So, as he stood at the end of the long, winding way which led to the Highwire's entrance, John himself was introspective about his complete immersion in outward reality. That inward sense of separation, of being yanked violently in two different directions at once, gave him a physiological quirk of feeling compelled to express himself from a deeper place than most, even in the middle of so many lines running that P.F.S. briefly towered over Atlantic City: "Um, can we end what's going on in the factory space, please?" "Are the Temple kids done?" "Just about. By the way, thanks, seriously, for taking care of the coat room thing. I got sick of answering questions. After the next two acts, we can fly free for the rest of the night, right?" "Yup. I'll take care of the Temple kids." "I'm lobbying for a fifteen minute break." "Go right ahead." "No, I'll wait for you, dude. I've got a roach. Tonight's one to celebrate." We were both lanky, me at dead-even, zero-sum-game 5'9, John up there at 6'3. "Right on." Yet that John edge, of meaning it, in a general sense, more than most, had just a hint of desperation in it. At moments like this, I never forgot that John's earlier life scored an 8 out of 10 on the trauma meter. Not many years before he joined up with us, John was forced to endure the murder of Ari Rind, on the college campus of the school Ari was attending. Ari's murder, by all accounts, was an act of the most senseless violence. He was brutally beaten to death, for the sin of standing up to a group of thugs picking on a younger kid. When John was panicked, both strands of his personality— the introspective devotee of all forms of analysis, and the burgeoning card-shark following in the footsteps of his father, who, as is crucial, also died, this time from a heart attack, at around the same time as Ari, leaving an equal, irremediable gash— collapsed into one basic stance before the world. John saw himself as a fireball, a dynamo. He was going into the world to do everything he wanted, all at once, and he would brook no interference. With the corpses of his brother and his father behind him, he'd make one bold lunge at eternal life, and, as for the rest, *que sera sera*. I caught up with John on the Gilbert Building steps. Cherry Street at night tended to be free of cops. "You got that roach?" "Yup." "We made money tonight. We can count it up and divide it with Jim when we go in. Did you see Lena?" "Yeah. She did

an Oompa Loompa routine with me, but we're going out some time this week." "You having fun?" "Yeah. But remember— you get to go home soon. I don't." "Is Adelphia House locking you out?" He smiled and shook his head. It was always like that with John. Despite being several years younger than me, there was worldly business sense, of the dark variety or stripe, in John's brain, which put John ahead of me slightly in the race-to-understand-the-world. Penn be damned. I knew that then, too. And did my own introspective routine about tragedy burning real, tactile understanding into the human brain. Roach done, up we went.

#54

"Wadin' through your usual more-ass morass, huh, Foley?" Bill Rosenblum was stoked. What Occidental was, was everything he'd always wanted— a real home with a real bedroom, that was also equipped with a real studio. The purchase of Occidental, DMZ'd out as it was at 52nd and Cedar, was the culmination for him and his kith and kin (band) of years of hard work, irritation, and deprivation. If everyone— proteges, clients, consultants, and old friends like me, had to brave the swim up an Apocalypse Now-level river to get to Occidental, so be it. Bill and I sat in front of his board, also set up with a desktop, feet touching slab stone, and talked turkey the way we liked to. The bedrooms, living room, and performance/gallery space being upstairs, the studio being downstairs, and, in an instant, trademark, classic Abbey Road inversion, Bill's board being set several steps lower than the actual recording space, we had reached terra firma. I was inclined to bitch, slightly, about the bitches. Bill was a mid-level person to bitch to— sympathetic up to a point, but easily made impatient by mawkishness or extremity. He wasn't especially taken with Wendy Smith or Heather Mullen. "Like the song says, take it easy, guy. I'm guessing if you have to choose, you'd take Heather, she's more practical. Never had a taste for rich girls myself. I don't know what else to tell ya, except that I'm sure they're both not thrilled that the other's there. That's an obvious one." Bill Rosenblum spoke quickly and articulately, like a professor. As he displayed what wares were in his head, he had the same problem professors often have— too many overripe thoughts needing to be expressed in too many different directions. What was in his brain about A, B, or C was what it was; but behind it, to really consolidate his first remarks, D, E, and F would have to emerge too. Thoughts behind thoughts. Yet, Bill always tormented himself with the idea that the boring guy would never be him, which exasperated the verbal constipation so that conversations with Bill rode a bi-polar edge from peaks to troughs. Obviously, as someone not untouched by both the interior and exterior rigors of professorial over-thought, I shared many of these issues with him. Our solution— get high! It never occurred to us that a release into cannabis was anything sinful or transgressive. I wasn't going to be the boring guy, either. "You know I'm finishing a book now we could record here. The kind of material you'd like. I'm hitching myself to the avant-garde, Bill. Whaddya think o' that?" "Stand-alone voice recordings from here should be fine. I have the board set up to withstand so much worse than that, you'll be easy. Did you say you did something in England?" "Yeah, I had a bunch of material come out there. Is that relevant?" "I've always wanted to do some kind of reach-around to the UK. Maybe I'll tag along with you." Having achieved comfort-levels on trips over many years, I was happy to let Bill continue mixing what he was mixing, and tour Occidental. Occidental had the look of a semi-ghetto, yet serviceably rustic, miniaturized version of the Overlook Hotel. The recording space at the back fed into yet another staircase, up to the kitchen area; just as the staircase up from the living room led to a second loft-space, feeding also into a narrow corridor at the end of which lay the master bedroom. Not Bill's! Bill's room fed into the

kitchen on one side, the living room on the other. He had his radio, all his books and comic books, several guitars and basses, and a practice amp at his disposal. Living room to performance space, several steps down, embedded doorway with a staircase back to the studio again. On the trip I was on, the semi-decrepitude of the place meant nothing. I knew it was charmed. I also got the message from Bill I got not infrequently— on the trip he was on, he wanted to work, and that was it. So, on leaving, I said, "Well, Bill, congrats! You finally got the set-up you wanted." "You bet, guy. When you leave, shut the door behind you. I'll see you next week." As I initiated the swim back up that river, I knew Bill was no Kurtz, and I felt what I always felt in the Aughts in Philadelphia— all of us, all the relevant people, had a protective shield around us, so that there was no DMZ we had to be afraid of. We could go anywhere, do anything, from here to 13th and Ellsworth (Larsen!), and nothing could stop us. Even as it was not unknown to us— no trip lasts forever.

#55

Times had changed in America, and in the Western world in general. The Free School had taken some notice of the Internet; we had a blog. But a vista had opened for me with poetry and the Net— I saw an unlimited amount of possibility in that conjunction. After all, poems are compressed and can be read relatively quickly. During the autumn of '05, I turned the Philly Free School blog into a poetry journal— Philly Free School Post— P.F.S. Post. With P.F.S. Post came an era during which I wasn't "in the street" as much. It was an auspicious time to reign myself in— John Rind, especially, had been caught in a social maelstrom with Free School hangers-on who had now migrated over to the Plunkett goons. It was a sick, alcoholic, head-smashing scene. The gossip and back-biting were terrible. It was all N broadcasts and mind games turned rancid. N would've needed twice the nose-candy just to survive. Incidentally, because I have written about her extensively, it seems incumbent upon me to finally reveal N's actual name: Niven Cammett. If I am loathe to do so, it is because N herself actively disliked her name. Niven, she thought, was a non sequiter-as-moniker; while the Cammetts were a family who disliked and discouraged her uniqueness, her sense of individuality. She was only grudgingly a person named Niven Cammmett anyway. N, short and sweet, seems appropriate for an individual who would always like to appear in transit, in flux. But back to the main: the remnants of our social network were lost in absolute entropy— and if I didn't work fast and hard, I'd have been lost too. I myself was also drawn in to attend some Plunkett readings at the time. It was a wall of poseurs and flatulently undereducated blowhards— but they were well-connected in Philly, more so than I was, so I couldn't afford to ignore them. John and I disrupted them by being physically attractive— they looked like mongrels and dogs. They even had the nerve to follow our lead and do readings at the Khyber. The first lesson I learned about the poetry world was an important one— the vast majority of poets are physically unattractive and (for the most part) sexually inactive. Those who embody actual sex, as John, Heather, and I did, are abhorrent to them. I made a quick decision— I wasn't going to give up sex to be a poet (and I did mean hetero sex), and the standing templates could get fucked. That sacrifice would be too great, especially as fecundity of mind often follows from fecundity of body. The situation also explained to me why Heather was so ginger among poets. They were a threat to her liberated lifestyle, and the politics behind it, as well. Chris, I was sure, would've spit on them. I relayed many of these going-ons to Debbie Blantz on the phone. Her Brahmin-ite perspective was tempered with a healthy dosage of world-weary cynicism, expressed with the irony of the occupant of the gilded cage. With fire, too: "Well, Jesus, Adam, you could do a whole lot better than these guys. Philly's got plenty of money, alright? Why do you idiots have to make a fetish of these clumsy, stupid oaf guys? Haven't you ever heard of the Main Line?" I inquired if Grace Kelly were more to her taste. "Of course, she's class, U Penn is class, my fiancée spent a month at Wharton. Here's hoping you knock the guy over, just like you learned in cow-tipping class, and teach Philly all over again to leave the bums in the gutter

where they belong." With encouragement like this, how could I stumble? For that moment, however, Henniker was still in my line of vision. What might be left to do there, Wendy-related or not, was up in the air. As were Deb's legs, I liked to tease her, for a guy two family steps away from the Kennedys, who (I liked to say) were watching Deb's every move, with intermittent approbation. Boston.

#56

When an acoustic guitar is both unamplified and being played in an acoustically semi-sound, semi-resonant space, what happens, happens in waves. Sometimes the sound you make sounds adequate, sometimes it doesn't. I sat, as it were, in the would-be tavern across from the Great Room, and serenaded Wendy Smith and her imported-from-Boston friends. You may or may not find me qualifying as a maudlin Irish drunk, but it had to be "Simple Twist of Fate": *he woke up, the room was bare…he didn't see her anywhere…he told himself he didn't care…pulled the window open wide*. Wendy appeared unimpressed with my Dylan-ism. Moreover, she was nonplussed. She was expecting a larger turn-out from her Boston crew, to see her lord her considerable power over the scene at hand. I was wheeled on as part of the night's entertainment. Outside, the snow from the night before measured about eight inches—moderate, for New England. I wrapped up my little set and put the borrowed guitar in its black leather case. Debbie Blantz, for one, wanted a word: "Adam, can I talk to you for a minute, please? Over here." We shuffled into the still brightly lit, high-ceilinged, full-length window paneled Great Room. "Look, I understand how you feel, but Wendy is doing a play-the-princess routine I've seen her do before. When you see her, ensconced the way she's ensconced, with the Bostonians, you might as well leave her alone. They're not just playing the money game, they're, y'know, *being the money*. Being Bob in response isn't gonna get you much." I nodded vacantly, and we stepped out onto the porch: me to smoke, her to, as we laughingly understood, watch me smoke. It was a night not to ask too much of. Until, later that night, my charging cell-phone rang late, 2:30 a.m., and there he was: Larsen Spurn. He was abrupt: "Look, you're up there, I might as well come up too. You wouldn't mind sharing your room again, would you?" "Not at all. You better haul ass, though, Larsen. Another day and we're expecting more snow." "I'll be there by tomorrow night." "Alright, see ya." "Yup." So, OK, and when he showed up, he had no one with him. Having made other phone calls, he dropped off his stuff and disappeared into the night. A bunch of us took a bottle of Jack Daniels and a little dope and went sledding. The Concord police were after us. Ha! Mostly, though, I couldn't find the center this time until I fell in with Sean O'Hara. Sean was a tall, heavy-set, crew-cutted Mid-Westerner, who I had already spent a substantial amount of time with, and liked, but who didn't make the night scene in Henniker. Yet we were moving in the same direction, books-wise, towards a salvaging of the American avant-garde from sterile redundancy and hermetic isolation. Sean began to unfold for me what Chicago was, as a lit-game city. And the Chicago environs, also, where he lived. He offered me a spot he could offer, in the Chicago trenches with him, and I, made limber by the low-priced majesty of Southwest Airlines and the possibility of staying with him in Palatine, could hardly resist. Even as Sean's low-key Midwestern mien found Wendy Smith, Debbie Blantz, Larsen Spurn, and everybody else a little dubious. I was to learn that the Midwest keeps its cards close to the vest.

#57

The other key decision I'd made was to pursue a graduate education past my MFA. Many poets (especially avant-gardists) in the Philadelphia are/had PhDs. So, I applied to a bunch of PhD programs, and received the University Fellowship to study and teach at Temple University. This meant a stipend and health insurance benefits— I wouldn't need to work at B & N anymore. I had no intention of becoming a pedant (especially where the arts were concerned), but teaching at the university level seemed like a reasonable way to earn a living. I was still doing my MFA, but was rapidly evolving into an avant-gardist (avant-garde terrain in contemporary culture being intellectually richer than standardized), and so couldn't learn much from a faculty dominated by sentimentalists and Pulitzer bed-warmers. I began, past Jacket Magazine, to publish internationally as well, especially online. The Plunkett poets were provincial in comparison, and while I couldn't compete with their Philly connectedness (some connections were Old Money ones, some South Philly), I could begin to connect myself on other levels. The Center City art scene at the time, not just us and the Plunketts but the DJs, musicians, and impresarios who ran the club-nights we'd been competing against, was growing rather dark. Everyone seemed to be drunk all the time. If it was a train-wreck, it was a fascinating train-wreck— all the exhibitionism was dramatic and intelligent (John and Ricky were exemplars); but I was working towards writing actual books, and Center City for me began to be a more solitary place. I wanted to survive the wreckage. If Mindy Suarez, who was a rising photographer in Center City at the time, managed to sneak me in, it was because she had several angles at her disposal to do so. Some of the angles were conventional ones, some not. Another Trish-hater, who had in mind the violent immolation of what she would consider to be twee Philadelphia formalism at the hands of a looser, expansively casual aesthetic (simpatico, as she would have been, with Bill), she also liked the idea of co-opting some of Trish's el primo real-estate for laughs. She was nineteen, and precocious. Also like Bill, sort of at PAFA. The only complaint about the time I spent with Mindy is that she went out of her way to keep the affair privatized. No mixing and mingling with Trish, Tobi, Larsen, John, and the rest. Just the two of us together, expressing the absurdity of what two bodies can do, when they feel compelled. Hispanic roots in South Jersey also guaranteed that Mindy was in no hurry to brag about this one: some Penn brat, me, hung up on poetry and books. Because she liked to tease me, I wrote her several series of teasing poems right back, most of which wound up in Beams. I knew using de Kooning as a model (Women series) would earn her approbation more than anything approaching my own semi-wonted formalism, let alone Trish's. Whose own Frenchified affair of two years, I duly noted then, was turning sour. So: it was quiet, without being quiet. I carried the newfound burden, for John Rind and myself, of beginning the work of initiating the real wheat of the cultural crop into the mysteries of the Philly Free School, which could only, I felt, get deeper and wider with time. Like Mindy, who was a screamer, the Philly Free School could only be a screamer over a long period of time, too.

#58

By the time I finished my MFA in mid '06, I had two operative blogs— P.F.S. Post and Stoning the Devil. Stoning the Devil I used for lit-crit and general commentary. The final summer residency, compared to earlier ones, was an anti-climax; no drama with profs, no sex. I spent the residency reading Infinite Jest and writing a new series of poems I called Madame Psychosis. It was an experiment in a new kind of poetic portraiture. By the time I began at Temple in August, I was ready to submit a manuscript with Madame Psychosis and a few other new series (serial writing having become one of my stocks in trade) to a major publisher. The manuscript was called Beams, and was accepted for publication some time in '07. Christopher was staging a series of events around his photographs; I helped him when I could. John was on the bar scene as usual. Through Temple, I met a group of poets in my age group who had recently descended on Center City from Amherst, Massachusettes. They were very status-conscious, and were status-seekers themselves. They had some Free School-level moxie around alcohol and drugs, even if they seemed frigid in other ways. I learned from them. The wisdom they taught me was dark— that unless you have a clan of poets to work out of, you're unlikely to make it as a poet in America. The Plunkett poets weren't quite enough to teach me this lesson, but after the Amherst crew I never forgot it. I also never forgot that I was staking my claim on iconoclasm— living a life as a sexually active heterosexual male not affiliated with any particular group, including (by this time) the Philly Free School. I could only survive by going against the grain, and I knew it. And as Heather had pointed out, semi-smirking, in her oracular way.

#59

What was new to me then was being alone in Center City. It was no longer the case that every time I left my apartment, I was guaranteed a new adventure. I became more settled in my habits. The Last Drop was convenient for me in many ways; it became part of my daily routine. I would sit there with a stack of books and do my academic work and write. Letters to Dead Masters began as an idea from that. John at this point was on his way out, off to L.A. to do video work. Christopher I saw fairly often; he was engaged briefly, then that broke off. Ricky studiously avoided running into me, though he was situated at Temple too. The Temple campus, in North Philadelphia, was a disappointment— a concrete jungle. Anderson Building, where dwelt the English Department on floors nine-eleven, was particularly hideous— a sky-rise done in tacky "nouveau" style. The English Department had all uncarpeted floors, and I was given an office with no windows. Because it was so forbidding, being on the Temple campus always elicited a crepuscular feeling in me. I was both doing and attending random readings around Center City; but none had the cohesive magnetism of the Free School shows. Many of the Center City streets seemed to have languished into deadness with the coming recession, or perhaps been petrified. I came up with the term "visionary deadness" to describe Center City then. It was a contradictory term, and meant that way. When I found myself reunited with Trish, I still enjoyed the funky, earthy ambience of West Philly— the Satellite Café, Mariposa, Clark Park. Trish and I, nonetheless, were forced to do an uncomfortable dance then. We had been, and remained, licentious about sex and drugs; but the holy shrine Trish set up around her painting highlighted something I'd missed the first go-round. Trish sought obsessively to remain, through her paintings, as pure as possible in the world. I was making careerist compromises left and right to advance my literary interests; compromises Trish frowned upon. If her painting life was forced to remain a privatized enterprise, she would deal. Sometimes, she did. But she felt hostile to the idea of any interference at all, and it meant that she was often lost, for months and years at a time, in inactivity. I was as brusquely active as I could possibly be. There was a level of my thinking I sought to hide from her— everything I did, any strides made towards public recognition, were being made to advance her interests as well. If she lacked the gumption to make herself famous, I would corral some extra gumption and do it for her. I never stopped believing in her, even as this time there was nothing quite as festive about nudity and pot smoke. It was also clear, from the portrait Trish painted of me directly before we reunited, that Ms. Webber's feelings about me had become mixed. The portrait, of me sitting in an old-fashioned velvet-cushioned comfortable chair in Trish's studio, was heavy on drab coloration, olives and greys. I appear to have Tobi Simon's face partially painted over mine. Was Trish the forgiving type? Sort of. But from the demonic, unsettling grin the Adam Foley/Tobi Simon subject wears, it was easy to see that Trish did not think highly of my affair, a two-nighter, as it were, and as with Heather Mullen, with Tob. Trish was expressing a double-possessive impulse, backwards and sideways. The

subject's misshapen head and hair enhanced the impression that she felt we'd done the wrong, twisted thing by her. Nonetheless, Trish and I had the nights mechanically built into us from before, and dutifully followed through our usual scripts. With my new sense of place-vibes, anything at a substantial tangent to Center City, yet still related to it, worked for me (including Temple) when I was in the right mood. And I did miss Tob, who was painting at genius level then. I began plans, not twisted ones, to broadcast both of them. Hot-colored.

#60

It was all there: from us sitting at Stain Bar in Williamsburg, where I read that night, and where we were joined by Samantha Fry, to us taking the train from Brooklyn back to Manhattan, to the miscellaneous diner we stopped at on Broadway right next to the Strand Bookstore in the East Village: I'd done it. By introducing Trish Webber to Wendy Smith, I'd accomplished one of the great social engineering tasks of the whole Aughts. The Philly painter and the Boston poetess: they even looked alike, with their symmetrical-featured, thin faces flanked by long, lank hair, and proud carriage. So we sat at the diner on Broadway, one I hadn't noticed while I lived in Manhattan (I preferred Leshko's on Avenue A, not to mention Katz Delicatessen on Houston which John and I had been bounced from once in the mid-Aughts), and bullshitted. The two proud artists were also clothes horses. Trish managed to convey her pride in Philadelphia: "In Philly, I like *Joan Shepp*. Once in a while I buy something there. They can get anything in the world they want." "I've heard a lot about *Joan Shepp*. Boston is weak on the world stuff, but back home (Virginia) we have our own *Joan Shepp* running out of the girls in my family and their rackets. Europe will export to you if they like you enough." "Is there a dress code for poets in Boston?" "Yeah, we're all debutantes. But seriously, nah, casual. Sometimes I wish there were one. Like your friend over here, who's always slightly more ragged than he needs to be." "Well, I'm no clothes horse like you two. But I once spent three months walking around State College in black leather pants. I'm not a complete deadbeat." Wendy sized up the lumberjack jacket I was still wearing, purchased at the Concord Walmart, and rolled her eyes. Trish laughed, and offered up something which closed the subject, "Philly's a mess of different styles. No one in Philly can ever agree on anything. This guy might as well be a Paul Bunyan protégé for all it matters." And the two girls ate sandwiches, which I didn't. I stepped out for a smoke, and thought of something else: the moment of complete and total retardation, when I realized that Jade Racino was sitting several tables ahead of us, towards the stage area. I noticed after I read, which means I had given my reading, heavy on new work from a manuscript I'd sent to Buffalo, without realizing that Jade was watching. No one treated Jade like a celebrity. I don't think Trish or Wendy realized she was there. The feeling I had, looking, in the late spring chilly darkness, at the miscellaneous Broadway church to go with the miscellaneous diner, up towards Astor Place, and imagining past it Union Square's rotted nighttime innards, was that it would have to be a long and winding road to connect with Jade the right way. If it was treasonous to Trish to have these thoughts, so be it. The depth and destiny in the air told me what I needed to know. Stepping back in, we paid the modest bill, and Wendy Smith took off, back to her hotel room in Gramercy Park. "I like her very much," Trish intoned, "and she knows you better than you think." "That sounds ominous. Did she say something?" Trish giggled, "No, babe. But I can see when she looks at you that she understands you. That's all. Let's get a cab." We did, made it back to the bus depot for our Chinatown number, caught the bus, and were back at Logan Square in a few hours. So: even

if it only happened once, the Philly painter and the Boston poetess were a success. The blonde and the tawny could deal with each other the right way. At least, in New York, they could.

#61

I had begun to visit Chicago every six months. The visits were oriented around poetry and poetry readings. Wicker Park in Chicago reminded me very much of Manayunk in Philly, and the Loop was interesting to me for being as clean as the nicer bits of D.C. and having the scale of Manhattan. Palatine, where I stayed, was a Bucks County equivalent. The sky in Illinois and Wisconsin looked different, hazier, closer, than it did at home. Times were dark for me, however, in Center City— not only because I'd broken up with Trish again, and icily, but because I was on the verge of all-out war with the Plunkett poets. I was gaining power and currency— I was out-publishing them. But the fight wasn't really fair; it was a group of them against one writer, standing alone. No one creative wants to stand completely alone in the world. The Plunketts had important hook-ups in every direction, including academic ones, and the formation, considering the level I was writing on then, and that I was morally and ethically innocent, was a true parasite wall. The main circuits they engaged were gossip-oriented circuits— I was constantly being slandered (and the accusations were slander-level ones) in places I used to love, like McGlinchey's and Dirty Frank's. John, when he was around, would always (I later heard) rush to my defense; but many minor Free School characters had defected and were arrayed against me. I reacted to these pressures (and the pressures of my career at Temple) by being punkish, anti-martyr-ish, and by redoubling my efforts, especially where the two blogs were concerned. It worked; I soon had a substantial audience for both blogs. That Center City could feel like a battle-ground was something I hadn't known before. Plunkett, in particular, was absolutely maniacal about getting me the hell out of his way, and (unfortunately for me) he had Temple backing to do it. Lines running were meant to be nooses around my neck. Again, Chris would've been happy to run over Plunkett with his Subaru. He detested gossips, when they were this sleazy and this stupid. Larsen and Bill were preoccupied, supportive when they needed to be. Heather, as she herself had predicted, had disappeared into (proverbially) the White House. Lots of porn-level action in D.C., huh, Heather? What saved me, quite unequivocally, was the Internet. I had a life online they, the Plunketts, couldn't touch. The Internet was its own "New Art City," which held as many levels of excitement to it as Center City Philly had when I first arrived here. And made indie/alternative poetry in the United States a reality.

#62

Trish did a portrait of us together, as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: The Fall. I'd nude modeled for it in '07, in her then studio in North Philadelphia. When she told me, in the early Aughts, "You're the jewel in my crown," she was already planning this. The studio was not far from Temple, with a view of the Walt Whitman Bridge which was re-created through a window in the piece. In the portrait, I appear baffled, but composed. Trish's limbs wrap awkwardly around themselves, as though she might actually topple over. It was as startlingly confessional as it could possibly be. It took me several years to understand what the issue was. The Fall was shown at PAFA, in an alumni show, in '08. One of my books was being taught, hand-over-fist, at Loyola in Chicago, and I lectured there behind it. From time to time, Bill Rosenblum would record me reading my poetry and send me the mp3s. Occasionally, a poet passing through from London or Australia would visit me. Sometimes, Larsen and I could get into some Free School-level drug mischief. Mostly, though, I was on my own, writing. The lovers, Julie, Dell, who entered my life at this juncture, didn't last very long. Julie Hayes was my student at Temple: a coal-eyed, doll-faced brunette with an excellent head for books, and a potential writer. Her volatility and self-destructiveness reminded me extremely of Heather Mullen. The lead-up was several months of courting. I thought it might be another marriage, but the volatile situation, once the semester ended and we got physical, tanked fast. Julie was a monster of inexperience, rather than experience, as Heather had been. She became too confused to go on. Larsen Spurn had been bemused by her, and by the situation. I invited him to join one of my early tete-a-tetes with Julie at the Drop. After Julie left, he looked at me pointedly and said, "I knew this was gonna happen. I knew it! I knew you'd be the kind of professor who…does what you're doing, Adam." Julie lived right across the street; I plead innocence. But Larsen, as usual, was right. Meanwhile, what I had to conquer was the feeling that I had to be heading towards something huge. Too many poets in Philly were arrayed against me; if I didn't find a way to overpower them, I would (inevitably) be overpowered. This is what most of the defectors from my erstwhile camp banked on. Little Foley, the party line went; he'll keep working and working, but it will never be enough, because it can't be. Not with us here: Plunkettville. Most of these people were primarily socialites who took for granted that that's what poetry was; a context for socialization, fags meeting fags, rather than a serious art-form. "You are who you know" was the dictum, and they tap-danced around ever speaking seriously about poetry itself, or poems. I was always on the edge of being counted out. Temple didn't help; no one there was particularly interested in my poetry efforts, and the poets on campus actively opposed them. I suffered the indignity of having my books taught hand-over-fist at major universities while being treated as a pedestrian graduate student at Temple. But I never gave up hope and I never thought of quitting. If this was "do or die," I would do. What The Fall was, as a work of art embodying the highest possible formal, representational standard, gave me strength to persevere, and the sense that no one could tell me I wasn't a loved person, or that I'd led a

loveless life. Trish Webber had delivered the goods, and transmuted exquisite anguish into exquisite art. I was standing with a real family that was really there. I stood on level ground.

#63

Did the Drop, or, as we often used to call it, The Grind, change that much over the years? Sort of. The mid-Aughts frenzy which grabbed myself and my cohorts gripped the DJ circuit running out of the Grind, too. Our peaks and troughs were often mirrored by theirs. And let's face it, they got more press and got more paying customers at their DJ nights, too. They always treated John and I with a thinly veiled sense of condescension. We were a bunch of art nerds and gentlemen dealers. They spun in circles where Philly and NYC mixed at the highest DJ levels and considered themselves national players, on a level hard (they would've said then) for us to imagine. By 2007, however, the most intense part of the fracas was clearly over, even as some electricity remained in the Center City air. Dana Blasconi had stepped onto a full-blooded metropolitan stage— head barista at The Grind— shortly before, and now ruled a bunch of roosts at the place. Whole-grain bread from out of the Bread Basket (Nebraska), but armed with suicide-blonde good looks, tallish, thin, lank hair framing her face in a Cybil Shepherd in The Last Picture Show sort of way, this Jacy Farrow lookalike went whole-hog on diving down into the mung and the scum with the DJs to send The Grind into the air the right way. Then, there were the airwaves ruled by her at the place, and when, towards the end of '07, she put Black Sabbath and King Crimson together in a heavy rotation, the hipster clientele, including myself, knew that games being played were getting heavy, man, and prices were being paid. My own thing with Dana was a moderate one. She, herself, had aspirations to be a visual artist (and the names Trish Webber and Tobi Simon were by no means unknown to her), but her whole-grained best energies were devoted to The Grind staying afloat at the highest level. Not pugilistic, herself moderate, Dana nevertheless resented seeing me with Trish, Julie (who lived right across the street between Pine and Lombard, in a high-ceiling flat with splinter-granting wooden floors, paint-chips galore) and the rest. She didn't have a steady hubs guy. I wound up writing an entire book out of this Grind scenario. The more stalwart DJs moved forward. Making Time, the flagship Philly DJ night, continued. Trish Webber always affixed her killer word— *declasse*— to The Grind. Yet it stood in Center City in the Aughts as a tribute to hipster credentials Center City had then earned— from art nerds like myself, to the film brats at U of Arts, Plunketts and other South Philly goons, PAFA heiresses, Wharton wonks up for a little sleaze, right back to the DJs at the center. Philly had enough pull that Dana plucked herself from the corn and hauled ass right up to it. Jacy Farrow or not, she manned the fortress as a living symbol, or synecdoche, of everything Philly had done right by letting idiots like us run the streets, set up shops, and do our sordid business.

#64

All things considered, and if it were up to him, there would be no classrooms like this. But there Sean O' Hara sat, and there someone else was, hanging over the classroom door, vigilantly inspecting Sean and I— a plasticene Jesus. This was Loyola, after all. A long way from Daniel's and Henniker. But hey— if you want to do books, no way out of the academia racket, also hanging there over the door, also, much of the time, plasticene. So, I read for Kristen Solomon's class, and the fourth piece in began, *The principle of sufficient reason has pinned you to a mattress and is coming inside you*, and Jesus could think whatever he wanted to about it, but I was the one with the hot book out, buddy. So hot, Kristen had discovered it on the author shelf at Myopic Books in Wicker Park. The class, as was noted on the syllabus, had already spent two entire class periods on the book, my first full-length print— a rare honor, if you know the English department racket from the inside out. Sean O'Hara was my ride into Chi-Town and also there for moral support, or immoral support, as the case may have been. How could Kristen avoid the requisite Q-and-A session? As racy as I had been, she couldn't. The first question came from an interesting source. How Audrey Cope comported herself as an undergrad, was with the dignity of Hollywood-level blonde goddess good looks, intermixed with Indiana wholesomeness, all ribboned-and-bowed into an irresistible package by a very rich, very pious preacher father, whose darling she was, and who hovered over her. Close, it would seem, to Wendy Smith again. But I got her. "When you were writing this, were you thinking about the whole thing piece by piece, or did you just sort-of weld fragments together?" She removed her glasses. "Well, I did some of both. Some of the book was written while thinking of it, the thing, as a whole, and some it was older pieces I refashioned for the book." "Could you read #7 for us?" "Sure." As I started in, *If you were a yellow balloon in tall, leaning trees*, I could feel Audrey getting tense. Even in the middle of my reading-trance, I figured out why. *Alright, Audrey (now that I know your name), you expected me to look and act like a geek, right? You'd never guess that I'm the same kind of freak you are— good looks, funny about books. Now you're stuck with a crush on someone you'd rather dismiss. Oops!* And so it turned out to have been, later. Not that much later. When the class was over, Audrey stuck around to hang a little with Kristen, Sean, and I, who were (as interested her) all reading the following night at Kate the Great's in Andersonville. Was Audrey a quick-score kinda gal? Kristen, it turns out, had taken Ms. Cope under her wing, and was used to Audrey wanting to hang out and participate in lit-biz situations as an equal. After Audrey left, she said why, to our inquiry, "She's brilliant. First-rate critic in training. Wait 'til you see the term paper she writes about you. You will know true happiness." I was happy then, even with Temple breathing down my neck and all the other adversarial stuff built into Philly in '08. Back in Palatine that night, Sean debuted his theory of what the plasticene Jesus does for a classroom. "The class doesn't need a conscience, right?" He dipped into a plate of Thai noodles, as we sat in the Thai joint. "Jesus is just there to tell everyone that writing and books are a sin like all the rest. If you don't see how books kill, take a look at our new friend

Audrey tomorrow night. Note the lust that only Jesus can cure. Note the avarice." He cackled into his peanut sauce, and moved on. I was a little more stuck, and eager to see just how many ways artistry can betray divinity, when its' of the plasticene variety.

#65

So, for me to get to Audrey's apartment, nestled as it was in an obscure neighborhood in Chicago whose name I will admit to not being able to recall (exactly), and then to hoof it back to Palatine the next morning, Palatine being an hour outside of Chicago (Bucks County to Philly, in local terms), the brakes had to be applied here, at Moody's, for once. And I would have to make it back (my thoughts ran) to Palatine pronto, because Sean and I had a voyage planned for the next day to Rockford to visit Chance Mahoney, another poet in our Chicago circle who counted as Chicago trenches, and who always promised a solid party. But Sean O'Hara had to cackle as usual, because he'd seen everything that had happened in Henniker between myself and Wendy Smith, and he took for granted at the time my player-ish habits. Audrey was even more grandiose looking than Wendy, and was obviously impressed with my book, her review of which, turned in as a term paper to Kristen Solomon, was itself stunning. How could I pass this one up? Audrey was sending the right signals. The wry sense was that Sean, who knew that the voyage back to Palatine, from the depths of Chicago, unassisted, would be a harangue, was enjoying my torment. And yet, as a large group of us sat at Moody's Pub in Andersonville, with Audrey and I cordoned off in an intimate tete-a-tete, the torment of an impossible logistical snafu was curtailed by the discovery of someone who, by chance or sovereign right, would always be major for me. I had the review in my back pocket. The brain-to-brain intercourse was superlative. Of course, Audrey didn't read with us at Kate the Great's. She sat in the front row, on a moderate night, crowd-wise, and without anyone but Sean, Kristen, and I knowing who she was. But, sitting at Moody's, it all tumbled out of her— the frustrations of a corn-fed Indiana upbringing, the vagaries of being perceived as a poor little rich girl, the unbidden, unexpected obsession with France and the French lingo, the literary ambition, carefully cultivated, which needed to be encouraged by people higher up like us. I was happy to deliver the happy verdict— "Well, I think you're very talented, Audrey. You do write original poems, too?" "Of course, but I haven't shown them to anybody yet. Would you be willing to read and critique them?" "Sure. How far are you from being done at Loyola?" "Not that far. But I don't feel ready to do grad school yet. I want to pursue the books thing my way, and I want to do it independently, please. You waited to go to grad school?" "I didn't need to, because I finished my degree late. I understand what you mean, though. What do you say about Baudelaire?" "Well, he's obviously brilliant in some respects, but he's immature. What I like from France is quirky." "Proust?" "Yeah, Proust I like better. There's more there to dig into if you can read the French." All this reads, perhaps, like a Woody Allen parody of two young intellectuals, but try to imagine, she was in deadly earnest, completely uncontrived. Which is not to say I didn't notice that her eyes had bedroom blazoned all over them the entire time. Which is also not to say that I felt something tug in my guts— she really does (I thought) want to do a quick score routine, but is still just slightly too inexperienced to pull it off the right way. She'll get hurt. It'll be awkward. Remember Julie Hayes. Sean, over there, himself can't not

want to see me make an ass of myself all over again. When the party moved outside at the end of the night, Audrey and I remained stuck to each other. Sean stood not far from us, smiling quizzically. Here was the determinative moment. I had already decided. For the good of the English language, and in chiasmus with the French, for the good of our souls, for the imperative need to maintain Chance Mahoney as part of our itinerary, who would also goof on this scenario, I was not going to give Sean any satisfaction and attempt to make a quick score. I did not. The specter of a Julie-again nightmare saved me. As was more apropos, Audrey and I became pen pals. She sent me a body of poems, with an ambiguity inbuilt—does she want them published? Does she just want a critique? Who Audrey was, for me, took and transcendentalized Chicago, as did Kristen and Loyola, so that, starting with Sean and the rest, the journey there would always have to have been a worthwhile one. It could never have been for nothing. Even if the carnivorous element would have to remain in the almost category. The car ride back to Palatine was a semi-triumphant one. Sean was proud of me.

#66

During '09, I got in an extensive series of arguments online. By then, they had a name— "flame wars." I was rather adept at flame war strategies, and for the entire summer the arguments raged on. A conflagration of another sort was unfolding that summer at the Last Drop. The culprits were two young ladies, a Temple and a U of Arts undergrad. Ginny was a voluptuous redhead and a promiscuous tease. Adrian was a raven-haired theater major and ambitious social climber. Together they did the dirty business of turning the Drop into a hectic soap opera. I was considered a suitor to these two and one of the main players. As the summer swirled round and round, everyone came to the realization that Ginny and Adrian weren't actually going to sleep with anyone. Much. It was sad and pathetic simultaneously— I later learned that some of the other faux-suitors were conspiring against me behind my back. I was being accused of rampant misogyny and even rape. This was false, but some things had happened in a manner seedier or racier than accustomed. The whole situation had an eerie quality, and it was an eerie summer. I was pushing the hell out of Stoning the Devil. By August, I was also working on a series I'd had around for years— Apparition Poems. I had an eerie sense that I was finally on the verge of creating the most overpowering poems I could possibly write— but by September, I was stuck again. Providentially, I was leading into my second Fellowship year at Temple; for '09-'10, I had no teaching responsibilities. Even as the diaspora of my Aughts family, from Trish being in New York on out, had begun, leaving me in a more unsheltered place, spiritually and emotionally, than I wanted to be.

#67

As the autumn of '09 progressed, I was more isolated in Center City than I'd ever been before. Even Trish had moved to New York, in materially unpromising circumstances, to pursue an MFA, at an institution less vaunted than PAFA. In early November, there was a fluke heat wave. I found I couldn't sleep. I was having racing thoughts, the way I'd had as a teenager. It felt about the intensity of a profound LSD trip. For almost two weeks, I hovered in this limbo state. As I did, the full, precise decade I'd spent in Center City passed through my consciousness over and over again, at warp speed— Trish, Penn, Philly Free School. All the faces and places, Baltimore Avenue, 21st Street, PAFA campus, buzzed around my brain in a bewildering montage of vignettes. This intermixed with a sense of violence, of the potentiality of violent death in all directions. My brain whirled round and round with imagery: bodies (of friends, lovers, and enemies) hurled off bridges, shot to death in backyards, ripped to shreds with knives in alleyways. I had to purge the decade out of me somehow. I took the three degrees I'd earned off the wall and put them in the closet, then replaced them again. I gave the mirror in my dressing room (21st and Race hadn't had one) the old right hook, but it didn't crack. When my feet touched the ground again, I dug into Apparition Poems with renewed fervor. My mind had expanded (as it had from taking and passing my Comps in the spring), and new vistas had opened up. For the next several months, I did four "Apps" a day. There was something strange in Center City that winter, which I hadn't seen or felt before— a spirit of enchantment. I called it (again) "visionary deadness." It felt like a charmed time, as personally hollowed out as it was— the new Apparition Poems were given a warm reception, especially in Europe. I liked to walk around Center City pre-dawn, and watch the sun rise from the streets. Again, desolation and solitude balancing gracefulness and progress. Some of the charmed events of the time were absurd— when there was a fire on my floor of my apartment building, they had to enter my apartment to open my windows (I was with everyone else in the lobby), and they used a volume of Coleridge to hold my door open.

#68

It occurred to me during the composition of Apparition Poems that I might make a video to go on YouTube around the poems. I asked Bill Rosenblum; he had the equipment. He said yes. So, one mild day in March '10, I took the #34 trolley up Baltimore Avenue, got off at 50th, walked two blocks over to Cedar and two up to 52nd and Cedar, Occidental. We set up shop in the front room, which had an all-window façade out into the street. The neighborhood, wedged between West and North Philadelphia, was extremely unlikely as a literary hotspot, but the light in the front room was good owing to this façade. We took about a half an hour to tape the ten minute video, only to find that it was slightly too long to fit on YouTube. It was a bummer that was to be rectified five months later. But we took it easy, smoked a little pot as always and he sent me the m-peg. I was also scheduled to read in Brooklyn at around this time, and cancelled. I had decided for myself that poetry readings were a bore and a waste of time— no one listens to anyone else, and poetry just doesn't work as any kind of compelling spectacle. If I had to give up seeing Samantha again, so be it. I was also publishing a series of polemical essays in Europe which stirred up a substantial amount of controversy both here and in the States. And when spring kicked in, I thought something might perk up in the Center City scene to draw my attention again, but that didn't happen. Enchantment had given way to some equanimity and some lethargy.

#69

It was always painful to see Larsen Spurn around. The last time we'd hung, in the eerie summer of '09, he'd laced some pot we were smoking with PCP, and it sent me on a trip. I decided then and there that I couldn't hang with him anymore; I was too old to be doing this shit. Larsen had some signs of maturity on his person, but mostly he hadn't changed at all from how he'd been at the turn of the century. The reckless twinkle in his eye was gone; he no longer seemed to have a lucky knack for getting away with things. Partly it was because, by mid '10, it was clear to everyone that we were in the grips of a major recession. Jobs were being lost; resources of all kinds were becoming more and more scarce; everyone had less materially than they used to. Because what all of us started off with in Center City was not that substantial materially, many of the Center City artists I had known were turning to ashes. It created a mood anti-sex, anti-drugs, anti-art, anti-anything but survival. Larsen, Bill, Pete, Tobi, all impressed me as looking like animals at this time; if I could've helped them, I would've. Instead, I kept writing as much as I could and kept to myself.

#70

The book Apparition Poems was released in June '10. I knew not to expect much at first; I wouldn't win any prizes for it, and it was unlikely to land on bestsellers lists. But it was money in the bank for me all the same. I had quit the two blogs, and thrown all my weight behind my books. I felt it was crucial at this time to do so; if I continued with the blogs, poets who wanted to dismiss me could always take the cheap and easy way out and just use my blogs as reference points. I was discovering that in many ways, poets in America really were (at least partially) the dregs of humanity. They always make a calculated attempt to shut out everything except what's au courant in their little groups; and, more importantly, few of them have a serious interest in poetry as an art-form. For poets in America, poetry is mostly used as a context for socialization, and to sanitize the art portion of the gig. Poets are would-be socialites, and sanitizers, and the idea of a poet standing alone, as an individual, is anathema to them. This was certainly true of the Plunkett poets and the Amherst group; and what it amounted to for me was the sense that I couldn't mix with poets at all anymore. The "fun" had largely gone out of my life after Trish, Tobi, Heather, and the Free School ended; but I liked living with the rough edges of being a working man, rather than a flake.

#71

In the fall of '10, I was teaching at Temple again. I was also working on my prospectus. For the first time, I had a sense of peace on the Temple campus. I had proven myself to myself. God knows, it would be too much to ask for any of these sour profs to recognize my achievements. Most of them were frustrated artists and scholars themselves. As for the kids I was teaching, I found them, as usual, very tricky. They didn't want to be there. If you weren't rigorous enough, they would rip you to shreds; if you were too rigorous, they would rebel. I tried to find some kind of golden mean, as I had previously, but I never felt that I quite got it right. In a sense, I had no real personal life anymore. Everything I did was related to my work by one tangent or another. I was always waiting for some chiasmus to happen between me and someone else (could be an artist or a woman, or both), but it didn't happen then. It was even hard to do hang-out routines with Bill Rosenblum, who didn't give a rat's ass about literature and really wasn't aware of the battle I was fighting. But what I had earned, in my solitude, was a fundamental self-respect I hadn't had before. I was the artist I wanted to be, and that I always knew I could be, even though few shared my opinion when I was young. The bozo adjuncts and grad students who threw themselves into my path could no longer engineer conversations which forced me to deny my life as an artist. I had the finger on them. I knew how to manipulate their queries into ones I could work with. Even as the chore of dealing with an already overripe body of work would take me the rest of my life. And the artists who had been golden for me, and Philly, would and could never die.

A Poet in Center City is still uncompleted

PFS

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